

A dramatic movie poster for the film 'Erupt'. The background is a dark, stormy sky with a massive volcanic eruption in the distance, sending a thick plume of ash and smoke into the air. In the foreground, a weathered wooden signpost stands on a rocky, ash-covered landscape. The signpost has a vertical wooden beam with a dark, rectangular sign attached to it. The word 'ERUPT' is written vertically on the sign in large, orange, 3D block letters. Below this, a smaller, dark rectangular sign reads 'A DISASTER NOVEL' in white, sans-serif capital letters. At the bottom of the poster, the title 'LOU CADLE' is written in large, orange, 3D block letters, similar to the ones on the sign. The overall atmosphere is one of impending disaster and natural power.

ERUPT

A DISASTER
NOVEL

LOU CADLE

Erupt

By Lou Cadle

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Erupt

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Section I: One month before

Camas, Washington.

Chad Keppler feared he would drop the "woman." Halfway to safety, the building behind them burning, dragging her along the asphalt, he was losing his grip on the hundred-sixty-five-pound load. If he did drop her, she could fry here. Get hit by burning debris. Suck down toxic smoke.

Move, man!

He adjusted his grip and dug in, pulling, his thighs burning, lungs aching, finally yanking her over the finish line. He looked over at Francie Quill, who held a stopwatch.

She shook her head. "Sorry, Chad. You're at almost nine minutes now."

He had seven minutes to finish all six requirements. He had failed the physical test to qualify as a firefighter. Failed *again*. He studied the dummy as if it might have an explanation for him. "I thought maybe--" he panted "--if I convinced myself it was a woman, you know, with kids and a real life, I'd fight harder." He shook his head in disappointment, not at the blue-clad faceless dummy, who was blameless, but at himself.

"Are you giving up?" Francie asked.

"Never. All I ever wanted to be was a firefighter. I have good scores on the written test. Heck, I could *write* it. I'm going to do this." But not today. He sat down on the dummy.

"Don't hurt her!" Francie said.

He wanted to be joked out of his disappointment, but even Francie's teasing couldn't help him right now. He did get up off the dummy, though. "Dang, dang, dang," he said.

Rick Mauch, one of the battalion chiefs, strolled up, peering at the clipboard where Francie was entering the time. "How a man got to be your age without cussing any worse than you, Chad, I'll never know."

"You don't know my gran," Chad said, stripping off the borrowed regulation parka. "About the third time you get walloped on the ear, it reforms you."

Francie gave him a sympathetic smile. "It's not your ankle, is it?"

"It doesn't hurt." He glanced up at Mt. Hood in the distance, its top lost in cloud. He had fallen on the McNeil Point trail last October, hurting his Achilles tendon, and rehabbing the injury had been a slow process. He hated to admit it, but it might not be as strong as it once was. "I'm fine," he said.

"You can take the test again in September."

"I know, I know." This was his second try. The first time, he had missed passing by eighteen lousy seconds. So close. It had been like feeling his fingertips touch a pile of hundred-dollar bills but having a gust of wind come and snatch it all away. He shook off his self-pity and forced a smile. "Thank you, guys."

"See you for pizza later?" Francie asked. "Six o'clock."

He shook his head. "Gotta work." Not that he wanted to join a celebration of guys who had passed the test. Petty of him? Yeah, it was. He wasn't proud of that. He was grateful he had the legitimate excuse of work.

When he got back home, he called his mother in Astoria and left a message telling her the bad news, asking her not to call back until tomorrow. Her sympathy would be too much right now. He poured himself a ginger ale, pulled up some Punch Brothers music on the computer, and sat down in the funky 60's chair he had found at a garage sale for two bucks. The upholstery was awful, a matted green shag, as if Oscar the Muppet had been kicked down a hill and then killed for his pelt, but the chair felt so good, it didn't matter that it was a little gross.

He nursed his ginger ale and thought about today, about how to shave those extra seconds off, where to shave them. Problem with piling on more training was, he wasn't really unfit. He had the wrong build, was the thing, upper body muscles that responded to training while his legs lagged behind. And the legs were the whole secret to the firefighter test, legs and wind. Climbing ladders, hauling hose, dragging the dummy. All about the legs.

Ever since he was a little kid watching fire engines speed by on the street, their sirens screaming, their horns blasting, he had wanted to fight fires. He wanted the fire station, a pole to slide down, shiny trucks kept clean by frequent washing, the camaraderie of the dinner table, the ringing of bells, the sirens winding up, hauling ass to jump onboard, saving people. More than anything, that: saving people. The truth was, he believed it was noble work, to risk yourself to save the life of a stranger. Noble--now that thought, he'd never admitted to anyone else.

And now he was down to one more chance to pass the test. Either that, or he'd have to give up the dream.

Enough. Enough of sitting here and sulking--that never solved anything. He was going to do some laundry before his shift at the Liberty Theatre where he took tickets and swept up popcorn. At dawn, he'd be stocking shelves at the Safeway. Two jobs and keeping in shape meant hardly any time for a social life. Had to pay the bills, though, and still try and make the dream come true.

Mt. Hood, Oregon.

Norio Greer needed a break. He sat on an andesite outcrop and shrugged off his backpack.

The slope of Mount Hood towered hundreds more meters above him, glaciers bright in the midday sun. The snowfields loomed over him--it was avalanche season and he was ever wary of those. The volcano itself he feared not at all. He respected its potential power, yes, but he loved it, too, an obsessive love that outshone anything he had ever felt for the people in his life. The mountain rocks were easy for him to read.

His gaze swept around, taking in olivine, breccia, light gray dots of pumice far to his left, an old dike to his right. He could see the whole history of the place as a time-lapse movie, the tectonic plates colliding, the subsidence of the San Juan de Fuca plate making the magma that drove up the Cascades, the big eruption so long ago that had made the andesite block he sat upon, the smaller blasts, and finally the most recent belch from the volcano, from Lewis and Clark Expedition days, that had sprinkled pumice like salt over this side of the mountain.

Other people thought the mountain was beautiful. His geologist's eye saw that but saw the story, too, an epic tale stretching back more than thirty million years, full of fire and brimstone--during the exciting times, at least.

Was this to be an exciting time?

Maybe. Norio was trying to figure this out. A month ago, it seemed certain things were moving in that direction. Increasing numbers of earthquakes jostled the seismometers for three weeks, some big enough for late-season skiers to feel on the slopes. A steam vent opened on the north face of the summit. The tiltmeters said the mountain was swelling, if only a few centimeters, to the north. Norio's on-site solo research became part of a team effort, as the USGS emergency response team came down from Alaska, and as Cascades Volcano Observatory department heads ventured up and OSU geologists drove into the area to climb up and down his mountain.

Strangers leaned over his equipment and brought their own; they flew airplanes and helicopters overhead with even more instruments. Then, as quickly as it had come to life, the mountain settled back down. The few reporters from Portland who had followed the story quit asking for interviews.

Over their beers every evening, the scientists grumbled. It wasn't that they were insensitive to the concerns of regular folks, not that they wanted catastrophe and destruction, but they wanted data. Good

data, interesting data. Not one 2.2 earthquake per week, not the old rocks, all the baseline data that Norio worked on so carefully these past twenty months since he got the grant to study Hood. There was no *Nature* article in that.

Already the exodus of the interlopers had begun, the DIAL-LIDAR flown off to bounce its state-of-the-art lasers off Mt. Lassen. Visiting volcanologists, not even yet fully acclimated to altitude, had headed back down to sea-level paperwork and computers or to taking their seminars back from their Ph.D. students who had been left behind, as Norio once had been left, to do the scut work. But eventually, he had earned his way to the job he wanted, and he was doing it right now, alone, in his element.

Norio thought there was still something to be discovered on Hood. He wasn't convinced the mountain was done. And he had been left alone to probe the mystery.

He liked solitude, liked the outdoors, or craved it, really, got a little crazy if he didn't get frequent doses of both. He wanted just this: the glare of the sun off the glacier, the brilliant blue of the sky above, the thin clean air in his lungs, and the volcano, quiescent or rumbling, right under his feet.

And under his butt, a butt which was now cold from sitting too long. He continued up the slope to the cache of instruments: tiltmeter, seismometer, a small solar panel to power the DC system, and an antenna to communicate data with the USGS center in Vancouver every fifteen minutes. He cleaned the purple solar panel and pried the metal lid off the buried box that housed the instruments, checking battery power, scrubbing a wire brush across battery contacts until they gleamed, and tightening down cable connections to guarantee an uninterrupted flow of information back to Vancouver. Working alone on his mountain, trying to tease out its secrets, he was at peace.

But the volcano was not.

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Central Nebraska.

Ellen Lennox tapped a chattering spiky-haired student named Jonah on the shoulder and gave him her best Bitch Librarian scowl, an expression that came more easily to her this spring than ever before. Her sour mood wasn't so much because of the kids getting wilder as summer break approached, or from the chronic lack of funding for the school library, or because of that bizarre smell in the worn brown carpet (what was that?) that always wafted up in the spring. These were all normal irritations.

No, it was that some nutso book-banning extremist group had been

petitioning the school board, who apparently all had left their balls in a lockbox back home, about a list of books that must, for the moral rectitude of the student population, be removed from the library. This list included, no big shock, everything from accurate science books to Harry Potter books and other innocuous fantasy fare. They had named over a hundred realistic Y.A. novels that dealt with rape, parental abuse, gangs, and bullying, issues that touched more than half her middle-grade students. She wasn't the most patient of people, and having to bite her tongue and sound rational and balanced and as if she were listening to silly arguments during the meetings had worn her down well beyond her last nerve. She had one more appearance to make before the Loons and the Ballsless to guarantee the idiotic demands would get tabled until fall.

The bell rang, bringing her back to the present moment. On the way out, Jonah mumbled an apology to her. She smiled and said, "No harm done." After putting books away, she grabbed her satchel and headed to the teacher's lounge.

Mac and Tim, the science teacher and band teacher, a pair of bespectacled and largely harmless nerds, sat drinking coffee together. She bypassed them to sit with her friend Claire, who taught ninth-grade English. "How are Pete and the kids?" Ellen asked.

"Same old," Claire said. "How goes the war?"

"Last meeting is Tuesday," Ellen said. "I'm building the bomb at home tonight."

Claire laughed. "This too shall pass," she said.

"So do kidney stones," called Mac, a notorious eavesdropper.

Ellen raised her hand and barely kept herself from flipping him the bird, turning it into a brush-off wave instead at the last moment. She really wasn't in a good mood at all. "It's not the religious nuts that bother me so much--at least they're acting out of their convictions, wrongheaded though they are. It's the board members, who all secretly agree with me but who--" She stopped herself. "I've said this all before."

"Twenty or thirty times," said Claire.

"I'm sorry. You're such a good friend, and I'm being a crappy one." She knocked lightly on her head. "My bad. Tell me about your weekend plans. What are you all doing?"

"Nothing much." Claire leaned forward. "What are you doing for yourself? To de-stress."

"I'm considering becoming a problem drinker."

"Seriously," said Claire.

"Seriously? Reading. DVDs of ridiculously sappy old movies with Hugh Grant or dogs or preferably Hugh Grant *and* dogs. Mostly, I'm staring at the calendar a lot, watching the days tick off."

"And then what?"

"Summer break, of course. Just like all of us."

"I've been thinking about this. You should plan a vacation. A real one. That'll remind you there's something to life other than board meetings, and it'll be a mental vacation right now just to prepare for it."

"But I--" Ellen began. And she realized there wasn't a good excuse to finish that sentence with. Hmm.

"Where have you always wanted to go? That you can afford."

Ellen considered. "I like mountains," she said. "Big ones. Not to climb. Just to look at." The image of an off-season ski lodge popped into her mind. Big fireplace. Hot chocolate. Through a plate-glass window, a distant mountain peak, and all of it far from her worries here.

Claire nodded her approval. "Rockies, then. Or the Cascades, fly all the way out to Seattle and start there. Or Alaska, even."

"I actually prefer driving if there's not awful traffic."

"Then drive, already. Go somewhere else, and use the planning for it to keep stress levels down until the end of the year. I'll water your plants when you go."

That imaginary ski lodge had looked idyllic. She felt better just thinking about it. Claire was right--though when wasn't she? Ellen beamed at Claire, grateful for her practical approach to problems.

The Cascades, she thought, Oregon and Washington, she'd never been there. She felt the muscles in her shoulders ease the tiniest bit.

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Portland, Oregon.

Jim Vang's thumbs guided his hero through the corridors of the castle, opening treasure chests and grabbing weapons as fast as his fingers could manage.

"Yim Zoo." His father called him by his traditional name.

Jim sighed, saved his progress in Final Fantasy, and looked up. "Father?"

His father stood in the doorway of Jim's room. "Come into the kitchen. Your mother and I would like to talk with you."

Aw, eff me sideways. What now? Jim shut off his phone and followed his father to the kitchen, where his father took his head-of-family place at the center of the table. Jim took his minion spot at the end. His mother stood at the counter in one of her weird thrift-shop T-shirts, this one faded green with a big yellow cartoon banana slug on it, her hand resting on a can of coconut milk as if taking its pulse, until his father gestured for her to sit, too.

"When you were born in California," his father began, and Jim thought, oh boy, here we go again. His father went on as if reciting from some ancient story, "I knew things had turned for the better, for after many years of not being blessed with children, you finally came. You were a healthy boy, and no evil spirits came." The thinnest worry line appeared between his eyes. "But now there is something amiss with you, I think with your soul. I have called a shaman from Sacramento to come and see what it might be."

No no no, not the shaman. Jim tried to keep his expression as neutral as his father's, but inside he winced.

"And your mother, she has been reading American ideas on the Internet," his father said, "and she thinks that we should consider those, as well. I agree, if the ways do not risk inviting a *dab*." A demon, which none of Jim's friends ever seemed to have to contend with, but then, they weren't Hmong. Demons had it out for Hmong, it seemed. Father nodded to Mother to allow her to have her say.

"These websites say," his mother said, "that we must make our communication and more family time. Clan time, too. And then you will choose better companions."

My companions are just fine, thought Jim.

"We cannot have you in the gang," his father said.

"Gang?" Jim blurted. The guys he sometimes hung with, a group of mixed Asians, all born in America, were hardly a gang. Sure, Tommy tagged, but he was pretty good at it, an artist, really. That was as close as any of them came to being gangstas. Where'd his father get this stuff?

His father ignored the interruption. "I have a good job here, or I would move our family to Sacramento or Saint Paul to protect you better from evil spirit."

Jim recoiled at the thought of moving to some distant cold place like Minnesota. For the most part, he liked Portland and didn't want to give up his friends or work to make new ones. He didn't want to suffer through more soul-callings and weddings and other traditional stuff that would be the inevitable result of living in a bigger Hmong community.

"But," his father said, "Your mother thinks, and I agree, that there are bad influences every place."

Jim nodded, happy to agree that kids sucked everywhere. The snowdrifts of Minnesota retreated to a safe distance in his mind.

"Your mother believes this. I worry a demon is looking to steal your soul and that is why you change. Demons cannot be easily fooled by moving to new place. The move might be more danger, take you away from soul if it stays here. Therefore. Make no plan of your own for next weekend when the shaman comes. For your mother, no

telephone friends until. And we will increase music lesson to two days each week."

His mother spoke up again. "And find more activity for you and Hli Dah with us." Hli Dah, American Lida, was his little sister, eight years old and largely a mystery to Jim. "So that, as website say, you have stronger ties with us and less so with gang."

"Thank you," Jim managed to say, as they'd expect. Bad as it was, it could have been worse. Might get worse still, depending on what websites his mother found next. Tough love, Hmong style? Couldn't be very tough. Military schools, then? He shuddered to think. His mother had a strange faith in what she read on-line. Half of his friends' mothers couldn't read English. They didn't know how lucky they had it, living with only the old traditions at home. Jim got stuck with two sets of traditions, his father's faith in the old beliefs and his mother's new faith in Google.

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Mount Hood, Under the Surface.

Molten rock, unimaginably hot, locked in the dark depths of the mountain, wanted to climb. Not like a person would want to climb, but like the bubbles in Chad's ginger ale wanted to break the surface of his glass and burst. The magma wasn't angry. It wasn't raging, as the documentary narrators claim, any more than those carbonated bubbles were angry about moving up through the ginger ale. It was amoral, without emotion or free will. It needed what it needed.

And right now, filled with a stew of volatile chemicals, it needed to find a way past the hard minerals keeping it trapped. It could break through rock. It could dissolve crystals. It could find alternate routes to the broad central vent that led up through Mount Hood. It wouldn't need to choose one among these many paths; it could try all of them. Somehow, it would find a way.

Section II: The Three Days before

Tuesday, June 11. 5:30 a.m. Cherryville, Oregon.

Norio was wakened by a crackling from his radio. The day had begun, but here in the western shadow of the mountain, one couldn't exactly say the sun was "up"--it wouldn't clear the mountain for hours yet. Dim light shone outside his window, visible at the edges of the mini-blinds. Another quiet spurt of static from the radio and he was fully awake. He walked over to get the radio and turned it up. "Say again? Over."

"Norio, you copy?" The signal was breaking up.

"One minute." He pulled the antenna out all the way and walked closer to a window. "Okay. Go ahead."

"We have a developing situation on Hood." It was Greg, in charge of monitoring at night.

"Tell me." Norio stepped over to turn on his laptop and clicked through tabs of web pages as he listened. 5:25 a.m. Weather, 4° C, still overcast, possibility of snow above 2750 meters. Clouds for the next 48 hours.

"Fourteen earthquakes since midnight," said Greg. "New deformation showing on the EDM, north and west."

"Major?"

"No, more like last month."

Norio clicked through to the night's seismograms on the laptop, seeing mostly a repeat of what he'd been seeing last month when the quakes swarmed. He'd study them more closely later, plotting them on his mental map of the mountain. "What about the satellites?"

"Still waiting." The satellite imagers had to be aimed at Hood first. Then the scientists could get wider ground deformation and heat maps.

"Checking the seismo data," he said, sizing the computer windows so the seismograms were stacked one on top of the other. Norio stared at the amplitudes and wavelengths. Hmm. Two seismic signatures were low-frequency, shallow quakes, nothing more than five seconds. Volcanic tremor there. Then again two hours later for a half-hour. Another signal looked like a rock fall, the line loose and wobbling. Probably not significant. He flipped over to the screen showing the broadband monitor mounted to the southeast of the summit. It was working, but the tiny lines said little to him. The seismologist at the CVO would be able to give his interpretation, more accurate than Norio's, soon after he arrived at work. "Maybe nothing's happening. Nothing important, I mean. Hard to say."

"I'm going with something important, Nor. We lost monitoring stations, too."

"What? Lost one? How?"

"Lost *two*, both of the new ones on the northwest and northeast faces. One, that could be some tech glitch, antenna down, or an avalanche, but two scattered ones?"

"Unless something went wrong when they were installed last month, identical bad batteries, maybe." He scrolled back through the seismograms and saw that indeed there was nothing for two of them after three in the morning. The last signal on one made him think *harmonics*. They'd gone off-line within minutes of each other. It wasn't enough information to paint him a clear picture.

Still, Norio's heart began to beat faster. His mind pulled him several ways at once. Where were his clothes? Gotta get dressed. What had happened to the stations? Without the stations, they were blind to the north. What did the summit look like? He pulled open the shade of the eastern window in his cabin, threw open the window--damn, it was cold out there--and stuck his upper body out to see the mountain better, but all he saw upslope was cloud. Not ash cloud, regular Oregon cloud, atmospheric water vapor. He shut the window. "Okay, okay," he said, feeling fully awake after the blast of cold air. "Kate on the way in?" Dr. Kate Wilson was the director of the CVO, Cascade Volcano Observatory, in Vancouver.

"Yeah, she's moving. When she gets here, I think we'll be calling in the response team again, maybe pulling people off Helens and Lassen. I already put the alert up back at yellow, aviation still green. She okayed it."

"Could still be nothing. It added up to nothing much in April."

"You have any sense of that?"

Norio shook his head, irked at such a touchy-feely question. "You know more than I do at this point."

"Okay," said Greg. "I knew you'd want to be awake and ready for whatever comes next. When Kate's in and up to speed, we'll do a video conference, figure out what we all need to do."

"Thanks. Over and out." He put down the radio, made sure it was plugged in and charging, and hunted for the Bluetooth for it in the pile of gadgetry on the dresser. Pushing around the pile of loose change, cables, cell phone, and the dedicated GPS unit, he organized his gear, and coiling cables he might need into neat stacks.

He put coffee on, took a two-minute shower, threw on yesterday's jeans and a sweatshirt, and checked to see the laptops were both plugged in and charging. Whatever Kate decided he should do, before the end of the day he might need parka, boots, crampons, screws, pickets, and rope. Hand-held thermal gun wouldn't weigh much,

though its resolution and accuracy wasn't anything compared to the big imagers they could send aloft. Binoculars. Gas readings were better taken from the air, so he might be in the air in a few hours. Or he might be hiking up the mountain. Mumbling to himself, he stacked equipment by the front door, one pile each for climbing and flying, and a third pile he'd need for either.

By the time his computer beeped at him for the conference with Kate, he was organized for whatever the day might bring.

Morning, South Flank of Mt. Hood. Fire Road 309.

Jim brought another armful of wood to the fire. Lida was setting the table while his mother bent over the fire, turning long sausages in a cast iron skillet. "We could use a propane stove for this," he said to his mother.

"I learned to cook with a wood fire," said his mother. "It is easy."

Yeah, well; she wasn't the one hauling the wood three times a day. A stick in the fire popped. His father walked up with a heaping metal bucket of snow and set it nearby to melt for wash water. After four days up here, they each knew what they had to do at mealtimes. On Sunday, his father had found the shaded depression that still had a supply of slushy snow to use for wash water, so they could ration their drinking water supply and wouldn't have to drive to a campground for refills every day.

If they had managed to get a real campsite at a campground, there would be water coming from a tap, tidy piles of cut wood to buy and burn, and maybe people other than his family to talk to. But after the two campgrounds they tried were full Saturday morning, his father sent Jim to ask the camp host, who directed them several miles south along a road to this dispersed camp site, "dispersed" a word meaning all the way to hell and gone, as far as Jim could tell. All it was, really, was a pale dirt spot cleared from the forest. They hadn't seen any other people since setting up camp. His father had been happy with the outcome. "Better for family time," he had said, almost breaking into a smile.

Yeah, yeah. Whatever. Five more days to go after today. The first day, Saturday, had been a nice day, warm, birds singing. Then came the first night of sleeping on the ground, cold and restless for Jim, every rock and clump of grass a torture to him. On Sunday the clouds--or fog, or whatever this gray blanket was called--had drifted over them. The birds sang less.

After the wet spring the Portland area had, water had seemed to spring out of the trees and ground under the cover of the cloud. He had to be careful not to get the edges of any material wet. Dew wicked up dry fabric like some monster with a will, one determined to make more misery for Jim. A line hung between two trees now, draped with four sizes of damp socks, sad little flags hanging in the mist, for all the good it did to hang them there. Every day, no sock was much drier, and new socks joined them. Jim was on his last pair. Now, at eight in the morning, everything was beaded with the awful dew: the socks,

the trees, the tents, and their blue Kia Sportage parked under the trees. You couldn't see any distance at all, so they might as well be camping in their own backyard as halfway up Mt. Hood.

If they were camping in the backyard, he'd be able to sneak in and play a game or read a manga. Use a toilet. But no, here they were, and Jim now knew what solitary confinement must feel like.

Breakfast was ready, rice porridge and sausages fried deep brown. The smell of them drew him. They sat on folding stools around the tiny folding table, with just enough room for a paper bowl and cup for each of them, and they ate in silence.

When they were finished, his father announced that they would go on a walk and help Lida identify wildflowers from her book. Jim had an urge to jump up and run around the table and scream like a maniac, pulling his hair, babbling nonsense words. He wanted his friends and video games and music and the city, not this wildflower shit again.

It wasn't that he didn't love his parents. He did, and he was willing to eat dinner with them every night, spend every Sunday with them, but this? This was beyond the call of, what had his English teacher called it in Hamlet, fibial duty. Was that right? Whatever.

His mother and sister tossed the paper dishes into the fire, and then carried the pot, pan, utensils and bucket of melted wash water away from the campsite to wash them out of sight of the campsite, in the hope that the smell of soapy sausage water wouldn't attract bears into their tents. The week's food was suspended on ropes high off the ground, the mist turning all the bags a gray color, so that it was like having the ghosts of food floating over their heads rather than real food.

Jim put out the fire at his father's direction, stirring, shoveling, stirring.

His father said, "I received your report card on Friday. Your grades were worse this year than before."

"School work is harder," Jim said, stirring the dead fire more to avoid looking up.

"The only A plus all year was in auto shop. I think you can try harder. Not so much fun with gang friends."

"Father, really. They aren't a gang."

"I know," his father said. "Not gang like in Asia. Those were real gangs. Terrifying men with big guns. But you speak worse now, your grades drop, you care a lot about nothing but care nothing about what matters." He touched Jim on the shoulder. "I wish I could tell you in a way that you could see. In ten years, you will have your university degree and other friends. In ten years more, you will have your own children and not be able to remember the names of these friends from

today, not one of them. Their names will be gone, their faces will be gone. They will be gone from recall, but you will always have family, and clan, and your wife's clan, and your culture."

Jim wasn't sure he'd marry a Hmong woman. Or marry at all. He said only, "America is my culture too."

"I know. And we would not stay here if we did not want you to become American. Adding is fine," said his father, "but you need not subtract first to add. Do you understand?"

"I guess."

"You hold on to what is good," said his father. "Study is good. A grade of A is good. Family is good. You hold to those."

"Yes, Father," Jim agreed. Anything to end the lecture. He was getting wet squatting on the damp ground.

His sister came back into view, the empty bucket swinging at the end of her hand. Father went to help Mother.

"Did you feel that?" Lida asked Jim.

"Feel what?"

She shrugged. "I don't know exactly. Like an earthquake."

"No." He watched Father open the car trunk for Mother. She put the pot and pan back inside.

"I maybe heard it as much as felt it," persisted Lida.

"You're trippin. You can't hear earthquakes."

She seemed unperturbed. "Mom didn't feel it either, so maybe so."

He hated it when she was agreeable, though she often was. At least an argument would be some entertainment. He was going to die of boredom on this mountain before Sunday. He'd die and become a ghost and rise to float next to the ghostly food bags and be stuck in this clearing forever. And if he survived but his father prevailed, he'd die of boredom back in his real life, instead. He wanted to do something, break out of invisible chains he felt tightening about him, but there was nothing he could do.

"Let's go look for wildflowers," Lida said, irritatingly happy. At eight, maybe she had no reason to be unhappy.

Jim had plenty. He suspected she was cheerful right now simply to irritate him. Stifling a moan, he followed his family onto the fire road. *Wildflowers. Kill me now.*

Cloud Cap Trailhead, Mount Hood, Oregon.

The ski patrol guy leaned against a filthy Wrangler, chewing gum. Jackson--"like Wyoming" he had said the first time they met, several months before on the mountain--Jackson-like-Wyoming Bellew was an aging ski bum, in his forties, tall and wiry, face lined from years spent squinting against the sun, looking like a movie cowboy, if one ignored the orange vest and climbing backpack.

"Appreciate your coming along," Norio said, raising a hand in greeting, hoping to avoid a handshake.

It worked. "Ski season's over," Jackson said agreeably. "Just waiting for an avalanche now, climbing accident. So, North Face, huh?"

Norio nodded. The weather wasn't going to allow them to see anything from the air, so Kate and he had decided that he should try and get close to where the monitoring stations had failed and see what he could on the ground while she organized back at the CVO in Vancouver. If they were lucky, the clouds would start clearing by tomorrow. If they weren't lucky, Thursday or Friday. Today, he'd do what he could with what equipment he had on hand. "Should we take your car or mine?" he asked.

"Yours, I guess. Government dime and all." Efficiently Jackson transferred his gear as he talked. "So we're going up the right chute?"

"I'll show you on the map and you decide about the best line to climb." Norio pulled out a topo map of the mountain and spread it over the hood of his 4 x 4. Pulling a glove off, he waited for Jackson to join him then pointed, thump, thump, to the two locations of the missing monitor stations. "Might not have to get right up on them, depending on visibility up there. Just get us close enough to see."

Jackson nodded. "Don't mean to offend, but I have to ask. What's your climbing experience again?"

"I've been on rope a few dozen times. Rappelled only once on mountain ice, in Alaska. I'm not going to go straight up two hundred meters on a glacier on rope with any joy."

Jackson shook his head. "Shouldn't have to." He looked Norio up and down and seemed satisfied with what he saw.

"Still think there's any way we'll get down tonight?"

Jackson glanced at his watch. "If we move our cans right now and don't stop to sightsee. Ice steps should still be solid. Would have been better a month ago."

No choice. The mountain had chosen the date.

Norio drove to the closed road, waited for Jackson to unlock the

gate with his key, and parked in a turnout on a packed four or five inches of snow. They ate a handful of trail mix each, drank some water, and geared up, Jackson telling him to put back items that he had on hand already.

He pointed to a metal box, about the size of Norio's hand, that he was tucking away. "What's in there?" he asked.

"Plastic bags. Collection box for samples."

Neither had a tent--if they needed to, if something went wrong, they could dig a snow cave. Norio carried a down sleeping bag, in case they got stuck overnight or injured, and what handheld equipment he could. With a half-pound of trail food, five pounds of water, and lightweight climbing gear, his pack was over forty pounds. He'd need a pack mule for everything he'd like to take up with him. He wouldn't be testing any gas levels today, and that bothered him most. Nothing to do about the forty-pound pack but ignore the pain. He got it balanced on his back, snugged it down, and finally nodded to Jackson, whose pack seemed considerably lighter, and followed the other man up the hill and toward the misty heights.

Timberline Lodge, south side of Mount Hood.

Ellen's stomach growled as the waiter set a steaming bowl of cheese-broccoli soup in front of her, next to the napkin-covered basket of mixed grain rolls.

"Another tea?" he asked

"What the heck, it's vacation. Give me a glass of wine instead. Nothing bankrupting. Whatever you think will go with the soup."

He smiled. "You trust me that much?"

"You must know a thousand times as much as I do about wines." She had maybe a glass a month, usually whatever was around at a dinner party, and she could never remember the details, what tasted good and what didn't, much less brand names.

The waiter returned to the bar and said something to the bartender. A man at the bar turned to look at her. He had dark hair and eyes and a lean but strong build. A mafia hit man, she guessed, or the local vet or, no, a traveling ski wax salesman. He stood up, a head taller than her waiter. Then he walked toward her, carrying a thick white mug.

She was surprised when he stopped at her table. "How's the soup?" he asked.

Ah, must be the restaurant manager. "Haven't tried it yet."

He gestured to a chair. "Do you mind company?"

"Don't you have some work to do?" she asked.

He frowned then seemed to understand and said. "Oh, no. I don't work here."

"Ah," she said.

"I'm not very good at this, am I?" he said with a shake of his head.

"Until I know what 'this' is, I can hardly judge."

"I'm trying to chat you up, as the British say." He smiled ruefully. "I've never been great at it."

"Why?" She clarified. "Not why you aren't good at it--who is, right? But why me?"

"Besides that you're attractive? What you read. I noticed it when you walked in." He pointed to the book she had bought at the gift shop that she had been paging through since she sat down. *The Natural History of the Cascades*. Half trail guide, half science.

She hesitated, but after all, she was on vacation. She wanted new and different. Take a chance, girl. "Sure, sit," she said.

He did as told, a nice quality in a man. "Thank you," he said.

"Want something to eat?" she asked, as the bartender arrived with

a glass of blood-red wine.

"Pinot reserve. Patricia Green," the waiter murmured, and then walked away.

Ellen supposed that must mean a vintner--or maybe she was being mistaken for this Patricia Green person. "Do you need the waiter back?" she asked the man sitting with her.

He shook his head. "I ate. Coffee here's good, though, if you want some." He took a sip from his mug.

"I'm Ellen," she said, reaching out a hand.

"Ty," he said, shaking.

"For.... Tybalt? Tyrell? Tyrone, after the old actor?"

"Older than him, even," he said. "Tycho."

"No kidding? After Tycho Brahe?"

"You *are* a reader." He sounded pleased.

"School librarian," she said. "We tend to know a little about everything. We only know a lot about a few things."

"Like what?"

"Harry Potter and the Dewey Decimal System." She took a sip of wine. "That's good." She took the basket of rolls and offered it to Ty, but he shook his head. She took a rye roll, fragrant with caraway, and pulled off a piece. She smiled at him when she asked, "What sort of parents name their child after Tycho Brahe?"

"Danish ones, I bet," he said, "but in my case, amateur astronomers. They met over a telescope, they fell in love over a telescope, they claim they created me under an open sky of glittering stars."

"Poetic," she said, smiling. "And possibly too much information."

"I thought so myself, whenever they mentioned it. Sorry." He toyed with the rim of his mug. "Who were you named after?"

"I'm afraid my mother got me out of a name-your-baby-book."

While she ate, they went on to talk about families, where they grew up, and their jobs. He made her laugh more than once. It was all very comfortable and natural, thought Ellen, but I'm not going to hook up with some random man simply because I'm on vacation. Right?

North Face Mount Hood. 2:45 p.m.

Norio followed the loose rope upslope, breathing fast in the thin air. Jackson was an orange and black patch ahead of him, blurred in the fuzzy white. The weather was not cooperating, and the cloud they were climbing into made everything look like an impressionist painting, hazy and pastel.

"Wait," called Jackson, holding up a hand like a traffic cop. Norio was happy to wait, to catch his breath and take a swipe at his runny nose with the back of his glove. Jackson called back, "This sucks. The footing is getting iffy with all this choss. It's like it's July or August up here."

His wind recovered, Norio was able to take deeper, slower breaths. He believed he smelled a hint of sulfur. His hands itched for the equipment that could tell him if any were here, but it was back in the office. He turned around in a circle, hoping for a break in the cloud, hoping to see a possible source for the smell. Nothing but mist. "Can we go on safely?" he called up to Jackson.

The man hesitated, tested the snow at his feet. "We go slow, and you stay well back of me and to the side, if you can. I don't want to kick a rock fall onto your head." He muttered something more to himself as he pressed on.

Norio trudged upward, the snow feeling mushy under his feet, now that it had been pointed out to him, and soon they reached a ridge that should have line of sight to the first missing monitoring station. Norio called a halt, caught his breath again, shrugged off his pack, dug out the binoculars and slid them over his neck. He got out the GPS and turned it on. Two satellites, good enough. He got a reading, aimed himself roughly in direction of the station, and marked an arrow to it in the soft snow. He stuck the GPS back inside and dug out the heat gun. It worked best close up, and he began scanning by aiming just upslope, then checked his alignment again and aimed out into the empty fog towards where the station should be.

"So?" Jackson asked.

"It's warmer. Warmer than it should be in June, right there in particular." He pointed. "Can we make our way along this ridge over there?"

"Wait," Jackson said. He coiled the rope and played it back out as he picked his way along. Norio donned his pack again. After thirty meters, Jackson called back, "come along."

Norio caught up. Jackson said, "I think I saw something up there."

The mist almost cleared for a second."

Through his binoculars, Norio scanned in that direction but saw nothing. He smelled something, though--definitely sulfur. "What did you see?"

"Something that I'd swear isn't supposed to be there."

Norio was digging out the heat gun again. "Like what?" he snapped, impatient with the vagueness.

"Like there'd been a rock fall or something." Jackson stared ahead intently. "Bare rock. Or a sinkhole?"

Norio walked several feet nearer and triggered the heat gun. 12.3 C. Whoa. Definitely heat ahead. The scent of sulfur, heat. "Maybe we have new fumaroles," he said.

"Like down on Crater Rock? Here?" Crater Rock, on the south side, was dotted with fumaroles, venting steam and other gasses steadily. Once a year or so, a hiker ignored the warning signs, got too close and asphyxiated himself there. A southern flank eruption centered there would be aimed away from the areas that put Portland at risk. A northern eruption, or a western one--that would be very bad news for people. A northwestern flank eruption with westerly winds--that would be the worst, a true disaster for people in the urban area around Portland.

Any eruption would be interesting to him, good for understanding volcanoes in ways that would eventually save many more people not yet born. And yes, good for his career, too. But today, there were people alive down in that river valley, and he was aware they were there, a target for any eruption that started here.

The mist cleared for a second, and he caught a glimpse in the distance--dark rock amid the glacier, and a wisp that may have been a steam vent or just another patch of cloud. Then the mist closed back in.

He repacked quickly. "Let's go."

"Up there, or you need to see the other place? I don't love these conditions, but..."

"We can't see anything in this cloud cover." And the footing was getting dangerous. He'd rather be in contact with the CVO when and if the satellite images came in than to spend another two hours on iffy snow getting to another blind spot up here. Remote imaging was going to have to be their eyes for now, until these clouds cleared. He was shouldering his pack again, debating to himself, to go up, or to go down, when the earth trembled.

The ice under Norio cracked. He slid down ten meters. He dug his heels in, wished his ice axe were in hand instead of where it was, on his pack. The rope jerked and his slide stopped. "Shitshitshit," he muttered. His heart was pounding, hard.

"You okay?" Jackson called.

Norio glanced up. Jackson was braced in the snow, both hands on the rope. "Good. Thanks, man, for catching me. Let's get away from here." He felt giddy with relief. That quake would have registered on the surviving seismos, but damn, he wished the two right here were still functioning. As he struggled up, his eyes filled with tears, stinging. Psychosomatic? Or was this SO₂ or, worse, HCl or HF? The Cascades had the capability of producing some nasty gasses. He looked at Jackson, who wasn't red-eyed or coughing. He hoped his own tears were imaginary, then, the product of too much knowledge. But the gasses might be real. He dug out a small plastic zipper bag, opened it, swung it around until it inflated, and zipped it up, collecting an imperfect sample of local atmosphere. He tucked it into a second bag and sealed that one, too. He snapped open the metal sample box and tucked it inside. If he was lucky, it'd stay intact until he got it back to the CVO. The tears were cooling in his eye sockets. He wiped them away. "Let's get going."

"Which way?"

"Down. We can't see, and we can't hike safely. Let's get out of here before one of us gets hurt. I know more than I did."

After forty-five minutes of descent, he stopped Jackson and got out his cell phone. Despite the lack of signal, he typed in a text to Kate. He'd leave the phone on from here on, and as soon as it caught a signal as they drove down the mountain, the text would go. It said. "New fumaroles? Patchy heat. SO₂. Rec. ^ avi alert."

Once they were off rope, they booked it back to the car.

Firehouse 42. Camas, Washington. Evening.

Chad was scrubbing the firehouse dinner table when Francie walked in, holding a green hanging file folder bulging with paper.

"Heya, Chadster, how's it going?"

"Always good when it's Tuesday." Until he could be a firefighter, he did a shift as a volunteer every Tuesday, noon to eight p.m., end of the A shift for the firefighters and beginning of the B shift. It was always the highlight of his week, unless he was getting regularly laid, which he wasn't right now, with no prospects in sight on that. "What you reading?" he asked Francie, as she opened up the folder.

"Emergency plan for the county." She sat and held up a thin bound booklet, showing him the official county seal on the front. "Walt asked me to review it after I finished my on-line class, see if there was anything new I learned that should change this."

"A class on what?"

"This. Emergency response. Class was sort of lame, tell you the truth, but the city paid for it, so who am I to complain? More terrorist stuff than we're likely ever going to need."

"We are next door to Portland."

"And Port of Portland, or container shipping, Port of Vancouver, or maybe the bridge, that's where the terrorist issues would no doubt be, but I doubt it'd drift up river to us. We're too small a town." She set out a yellow legal pad and pen. "We might get some emergency with the paper mill, though, some chemical spill. Or Burlington Northern coming through with a hundred cars of something toxic, derailing. That'd be bad. More likely, a wildfire or flood. Maybe earthquake. Mt. St. Helens thing."

"Bathtub race disaster," he suggested. "That's coming up next month."

She grinned. "Yeah, could happen. I'll make sure it's covered in the plan."

He went back to cleaning and was almost done when the alarm rang, echoing off the concrete walls downstairs. Francie jumped up, whipping out of the room so fast he felt the breeze of her passing. Chad's whole body quivered as the sound continued, calling to the firefighters. He longed to join her, to *be* her for the next few hours. For now, he could only go downstairs to the door, stay out of the way, and watch the crew, moving fast and with purpose, getting suited up and mounting the rig. The engine growled to life and the last man jumped on, then the red truck was gone from sight, its siren rising to a

thrilling wail.

After the siren had faded, he went down to the communications center. Kane, a skinny middle-aged guy with ancient acne scars, was on duty there, and held up a finger to silence Chad. "Yes, they should be arriving in less than three minutes." He lifted the mouthpiece from his mouth. "Do something for you?"

"What's the alarm?"

"Kitchen fire, Woodlawn area." His focus drifted away while he listened through his earpiece and, after a moment of being ignored, Chad left.

With longing, he touched the side of the EMT van as he passed it and then rubbed out his thumbprint with his shirttail. He went back up to the dining room. Francie's papers were still sitting there and, to distract himself from thoughts of the fire he couldn't fight or even see, he sat down and began to read. By the time he heard the engine pull back into its bay, he had read a good chunk of one document and scanned a second. He was flipping through the loose papers in the file when Francie came back upstairs, her face flushed and happy.

"How was it?" he asked, standing.

"Minor grease fire. Elderly woman forgot the stove was on."

A.J., one of the older firefighters, came in the door behind her. "Always hungry after a call," he said cheerfully, moving back into the kitchen.

"Much damage?" Chad asked Francie.

"Limited to the kitchen. She called it in pretty quick. As wet as it has been this spring, the fire wouldn't have spread far. On her way out she tried to put it out. Grabbed a canister off her counter and tossed it on the pan."

A.J. came back in with an apple and finger of string cheese, hearing the last. "Yeah, she grabbed the wrong thing." He sat at the table and bit into his apple.

Francie shook her head, grabbing a chair and turning it to sit backwards in it. "Sugar, not flour. Place is going to smell like burned sugar for a while."

"Reminds me of Christmastime around my mother's house," A.J. said. "Mom never could keep from burning her candy." He and Francie grinned at each other, and Chad felt odd. Included in the conversation, but left out of the feeling of a job well done, missing the adrenaline and shared satisfaction. Feeling like an unwelcome guest, he remained standing and shifted his weight from leg to leg, listening to their banter.

He waited until A.J. had left, then asked Francie, "You still wired from the fire?"

"Naw." She studied his face. "Something wrong?"

"No," he said. He was not going to whine that he felt "left out." How lame would that sound? "I had some questions about this file here." He pointed to it.

She raised her eyebrows.

He flinched, worried he had crossed some line. "Sorry if I wasn't supposed to see it."

"No, that's no problem," she said. "Just a little surprised it interested you. What questions do you have?"

"Well, it doesn't seem a plan so much as a list of what might go wrong. Except for saying the police are lead in most cases, it isn't, you know, a *plan*."

"Maybe that's why Walt wanted me to look at it. But there should be an emergency operations plan--list of equipment and responsibilities and so on. You didn't see that?"

"No. It talks about Portland's plan, like they have something detailed. Maybe you can call and get a copy of that if you need it. You know, like a model to copy."

"Hey, thanks, Chad," she said. She pushed a stray bit of hair from her face then sniffed her hand. "Need a shower before I get back to this." She left.

Alone again, Chad went back to the main bay, intending to help put the rig back in order. On the other side of the truck, he could hear Kane talking to A.J. "--auxiliary shit."

A.J.: "How it's done, man."

Kane: "He's just in the way, stupid kid."

Chad froze, realized Kane was talking about him, and felt his stomach drop. He stayed still and held his breath.

A.J.: "Yeah? He seems real careful about that to me."

Kane's answer was too low to hear. But he could hear venom in the tone.

"Well, take it up with the battalion chief then."

Chad backed away, went back up to the dining room, realized he didn't want to see Francie when she came back from the shower--or anyone--and he padded back into the kitchen, keeping the overhead light off as the swinging door closed behind him. Feeling his way down the center island to the far wall, he found the stove and turned on the hood light. He grabbed a sponge and wiped the already clean stainless steel countertops, cleaned for something to do, for distraction. He could feel his face burning and he kept it turned away from the door, in case someone came in.

His mind turned it over and over. *Was he in the way?* Did they all resent him like Kane? When Francie said he helped, was she--what, patting him on the head like a puppy? He felt like a kid. Like a stupid, clumsy kid playing at being a fireman. He dropped the sponge and

gripped the edge of the sink, standing there, trying to keep himself under control. He could still feel the red heat of his flushed face, but he was not going to get all emotional and bawl like a kid, too.

Many deep breaths later, he had a handle on his emotions. The heat in his face was fading. His thumbs ached from where he'd dug them into the lip of the counter. Turning on the cold water, he splashed some on his face, dried it with his sleeve, and took a deep breath. He pushed through the doors, head tucked down, and he walked past Francie without saying anything, down to the central room, and out the side door without seeing anyone else. It was 45 minutes before he was scheduled to leave, but no one would notice. Or care.

Timberline Lodge. Evening.

Ellen and Ty's late lunch had turned into more coffee on the front terrace. She kept thinking she should head out, go down the mountain and find a place to stay cheaper than the lodge, where the price of a room would have her sleeping in a car for the next four days to keep to her budget, but soon night had fallen, and they had moved inside to the central room. She didn't want to leave, not yet. They sat on a soft sofa facing the big stone fireplace, Ty ordered appetizers to nibble on, and they were still talking like old friends. She was enjoying herself, feeling none of the stress she had back in Nebraska. Their conversation had gone from astronomy to religion to national politics--which neither of them had much interest in--and back to his work as a community college teacher of physics.

"Your parents must be proud," she said, "being astronomers."

"They may have preferred I turned into a Neil DeGrasse Tyson or Carl Sagan," he said, "but this is acceptable."

They touched on the politics of teaching in a middle school in Nebraska versus those of a community college in a big coastal city, which sounded much easier to cope with. She told him she was jealous. But she didn't dwell on her problems of this past year. She was supposed to be avoiding that stress, not recalling it. They were both on summer break, with three months of freedom for him, a little over two more for her. For two strangers who met accidentally on a mountainside, they shared a number of common ideas--but not so many that she didn't find him interesting in his differences.

He had an irreverent, self-deprecating humor, he was smart, he really listened, and he didn't brag. His interests were broader than science. Though he had looked fine to her at the beginning, he seemed more attractive the more they talked. It was the way his enthusiasms lit up his face, maybe. Or the wry smile when he poked fun at himself.

"How about dinner here at the lodge?" he said. "My treat."

"That's kind, but no, thank you."

"I know of a great bistro back in Gresham, not two miles from my house."

Ellen smiled and shook her head.

"They serve breakfast," he said.

She laughed.

"All right, then," he said. "What *are* you willing to do with me? Either I've lost my ability to read people altogether, or you do like me a little."

"I do." And more than a little. She thought about what sounded like a good first date, or second date, if this counted as the first. "How about a nice easy hike tomorrow?" she suggested.

"How about a nice easy overnight backpacking trip? I know some great trails."

"Do I know you well enough to spend the night alone on a mountain with you?" she mused, asking herself more than him.

"I can give you references," he offered. "My department chair--I never had a sexual harassment claim in fourteen years of teaching. My neighbor with the two teenage daughters? A cop I barely know but might be willing to say he knows me better than he does?"

She laughed. "Okay, give me your college department's phone number."

He looked surprised but pulled out his wallet and handed her his business card.

She looked at it. Ty B. Atkinson. She wouldn't call his department, but she would call this number tomorrow morning and make sure his voice mail was his voice. She would also try tonight to find a picture of him on-line, maybe at the college website, to make sure he was who he said he was. She was 99.9% sure he was as disingenuous as he appeared, but with researching a person's background possible with a click of a mouse button, why not make sure? "Maybe an overnight trip is a bit too much, this early," she said.

"Then a day hike. Or I can call friends and try to get another couple to go along. Or we can sightsee in Portland."

"Isn't it pretty far?"

"No, just next door to where I live, next thing west. And the roses are in bloom. You have to see the rose garden. Oh, and Powell's, one of the remaining healthy bookstores in America. It's huge. You'll love it. Street art like you've never seen. It's one of the best cities in the country."

"You're a secret employee of the chamber of commerce, aren't you?"

He grinned.

She agreed to a day of sightseeing in Portland, and he drew her a map to a Walmart in Gresham, where they could meet at 9:30 the next morning.

He followed her down the hill in his hybrid until she found a strip mall in the town of Sandy with a Starbucks where she could get online and grab a muffin for supper. As she pulled in, he gave her a friendly beep of his car horn. She watched his taillights speed on down the hill into the night.

She'd check him out online, email Claire with a vacation update and report on the potential romance, and get info on a place to stay

tonight, some no-frills campground, maybe.

Ellen smiled to herself. What a great vacation this was turning out to be.

Beneath the ice. The mountain at midnight.

The center of the mountain is a maze of tubes and tunnels, channels and chambers, and the molten rock has found two good paths to move upward. About a half mile from the old crater, the river of magma splits, part of it moving up, up, up, through a vertical shaft Norio would call the central conduit. Instead of bubbles rising from ginger ale, now it's like a ginger ale into which someone dropped a whole package of Mentos. The gas rising from this bubbling brew forces its way through cracks and emerges as fumaroles, or geysers of steam, carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide, and other volatile compounds, jets of gas like the ones that had knocked out the north face monitoring stations.

Another smaller river of magma moves west from the point of the split and spreads out into a vast chamber along the west flank of the mountain. Steaming magma oozes along, propelled by the gas pressure within, and it begins to fill the empty spaces of the chamber. Above this pool of almost two-thousand-degree molten rock lies the old surface of the mountain, built thousands of years ago from other magma. Above that thick crust of rock is Reid Glacier, tons and tons of thick ice. Centered at 45.37, -121.72 as the GPS measures it, and despite the plummeting night temperature, the magma starts to melt the glacier.

Two days before. Cascades Volcano Observatory, Vancouver Washington, 1:15 p.m.

The morning meeting had lasted hours already. Kate had shown several remote images, and various department heads had reported. The room was noisy now with conversations, small groups huddled together over computers, models and seismograms and jpegs, with some raised voices as debate grew heated, as they tried to decide if the volcano was likely to erupt.

The arrival of bags of grocery store sandwiches broke up most of the groups. People still talked over their food, but the food also had brought some lowered voices and organization, much to his relief.

Kate took advantage of that to call everyone to order. "Keep eating, but I want a two minute opinion from everyone here," she said. "What are we looking at? What needs to be done next?"

Some people did not hold to the two-minute limit, only one person passed, and Norio simply seconded that they needed to replace the lost north monitoring stations ASAP. Twice, Kate needed to interrupt cross talk to prevent a debate. By a little after two o'clock, everyone had his or her say and Kate was nodding.

"Okay. So we all think we may be working towards an eruption, probably lateral, maybe vertical, maybe soon. Or in a hundred years, give or take." A ripple of amusement passed through the group at the wide range of time, but they all knew that was volcanology. With geological processes, they could only predict in geological time--with monitoring precursor events, they could pinpoint dangers more easily than those trying to predict earthquakes, but still not close enough to satisfy the public, not always. People thought in terms of minutes. The earth changed over eons.

Kate went on. "We have two helicopters and one small plane lined up for tomorrow morning at seven, to do thermal scans, test for gas, and if there's any break in the cloud, get some eyes on this thing." She named six names, including Norio's, for this work. She also picked two hydrologists to send up the Sandy River by car. "You all radio in as you know more. If I'm not answering, phone and leave a detailed voice mail. Email raw data as soon as you can. A team will take up a temporary monitoring station to the north face. We need accurate deformation maps there." She named three of the newer, younger scientists for that.

"I want the rest of us to take the data we have, and what comes in new from the field teams and satellites, and model two possible

eruption directions, vertical and laterally to the west, three possible strengths, VEI 3, 4, and 5." The VEI was the Volcanic Eruptive Index, equivalent to the Beaufort scale for hurricanes or the modified Mercalli for earthquakes, telling how serious the event, the cubic kilometers of ash expelled, the height of the plume, and the extent of the devastation. Mt. St. Helens in 1980 was VEI 5, Pinatubo in the Philippines in 1991 was VEI 6.

"I want those six models to be as precise as possible. I want graphics for outreach to show the media and first responders. I want archival footage, stills, and maps of St. Helens 1980 ready when they ask for it for a comparison. I think we should be at yellow alert status for now, yellow for aviation, but I want PDX and Sea-Tac informed explicitly of not only the eruption dangers but also gas dangers. I don't want some passenger jet falling out of the sky because we neglected to mention the danger."

Because of its geochemistry, Mt. Hood was capable of producing much more hydrochloric and hydrofluoric gas than Mt. St. Helens had put out in 1980. The gasses it released could be very dangerous indeed, and Norio thought it was smart of Kate to be overly cautious about this, at least until they had hard facts on which gasses the volcano was venting right now. He itched to get out there and collect some good, solid data.

Kate went back to the map. "I further think we should close the ski areas and shut off the mountain to hiking and climbing above the timberline. We'll recommend temporary evacuation of Parkdale, Government Camp, and Welches and any dwelling within 50 meters of the Sandy, Zig Zag, and Hood Rivers." There were some noises of surprise at this. She said, "I know, it may seem alarmist, but the tremor is steady now, has been the whole morning, and until we can get a clear picture, better safe than sorry. Possibly in two to five days, we'll rescind, but for now, until we understand more, those evacuations are prudent. There's as good a chance that in two to five days, we'll change them to mandatory."

The meeting broke up and Norio met with the other five people going up into the air the next day. He was teamed with Roger Akroyd, one of the three gas emissions specialists at the CVO. Akroyd shook his hand. "Nice job getting the air sample up there."

"It stayed uncontaminated?"

"Looks like."

"Good. I really want to get some solid readings. I wish we could get up there today."

Akroyd glanced at his watch. "Day's shot anyway, even if there were a plane available."

Akroyd and Norio went to the storage level and pulled out the big

DOAS and a hand-held COSPEC unit, checking them over, then carrying them outside to test them further. The big unit could record data internally; a cable and laptop could retrieve the info later. The smaller COSPEC worked more like a radar gun--point, click, and you could note the readout. Grabbing other gear from storage, they ran across the climbing team hacksawing a hole through a blue plastic tub, seating a seismometer into it, pulling it out and sawing some more, arguing together the whole while. Norio was glad he wasn't going with that noisy bunch. Akroyd was okay, soft-spoken and careful in his work.

Next he and Akroyd went down to seismography and looked at what had been happening during the meeting. The bottom line was, magma was moving up, breaking rocks at ever-higher levels, shaking the mountain as it moved. Norio left the seismology office certain that something good was going on with his mountain. He was hopeful he'd live to see it erupt.

Akroyd told him to wait while he went to his office. When he came back, he was smiling. "Great. Needed to check with the wife first. If you don't want to stay here or drive all the way back to your place, you can come home with me for dinner, stay in our spare bedroom if you'd like."

Norio hesitated. He'd be more in the loop if he stayed on a cot here. But there'd be people and noise and he'd be stressed from a night of that. He'd lose too much time driving home and back. So Akroyd's offer might work best. "Sure," he said, "Thanks." He hoped there weren't a herd of kids at Akroyd's, but he suspected it'd be rude to ask that before giving his answer. "Nice of you to offer," he added, hoping that was enough of polite thanks. He never knew. Social conventions were a mystery to him.

That evening, he found that Akroyd did have one kid, but it was 13 and wearing an iPod all the time. Akroyd's wife was a chatterer, so Norio excused himself early and finally relaxed behind a closed door in the too-soft guest bed. He went to sleep and dreamed of a volcano that erupted ash and kept erupting, the ash cloud growing to impossible heights, days and weeks of ash that covered the whole world in a warm gray blanket of stillness.

Thursday morning, June 13. In the air over Mt. Hood.

Akroyd was hunched over the hand-held COSPEC while Norio stared out the helicopter window into a swirling soup of white cloud. The big instrument they had managed to bolt to the exterior of the helicopter in a way that the pilot, Corey, finally approved of, as long as Akroyd promised to stay in a specific seat for counterbalance.

They had been scanning the mountain from the air for two hours now, coordinating their passes with the other helicopter so they'd have one complete picture of at least the airborne sulfur compounds above the timberline by noon. The small plane was well above them, quartering the whole mountain.

"I'll want to refuel soon," said the pilot's voice over the earphones. Norio nodded and glanced back to make sure Akroyd had heard. Akroyd looked up and made an okay sign. "Finish this track to the timberline if you can," he shouted. They all had to use raised voices, even with the headphones on, to overcome the noise while the door was open. The pilot said "Roger," and they finished that pass and then headed west to the airport.

When they landed to refuel, Akroyd went to take a leak and Norio phoned the CVO. He got through to Kate's assistant and asked, "Anything new?"

"I'll put you on hold for Kate, but there's two other calls ahead of you."

"Transfer me to someone in seismology, then. Anybody available."

The voice at the end of the line wasn't one Norio knew. New people must be coming in from the field. "Norio Grier, up in the helicopter," he said. "What's happening on the mountain?"

"Rate of tremors is decreasing slightly this morning."

There was nothing else, so Norio signed off.

In twenty minutes, they were refueled and back in the air, moving toward the north side of the mountain over the spot where the monitoring stations had disappeared. Akroyd's voice came into his ear. "Come back here, Grier," he said. "Look at these numbers."

Norio cautiously left his seat for the empty one in the rear and watched the digital readout. The numbers began to drop.

"We were over something there."

"New fumarole, I'm still betting." Norio took out his hand-held GPS and compared the reading to the map of Hood he carried in his head. They weren't over any known fumaroles. They were close to where he had smelled sulfur on his hike two days before, but not right on top of

it.

The numbers continued to drop and Norio looked out the window again. "I think I saw someone down there. Maybe our guys with the equipment." The tiny figures were gone now, lost in a denser patch of the cloud cover.

By two-thirty, they had finished mapping the gasses on their half of the mountain and the helicopter dropped them in the CVO parking lot. After unbolting the big DOAS from the outside of the helicopter, they carried the instruments back inside and took them to Akroyd's office where he downloaded the data. It took over two hours to produce a rough map of sulfur levels. Norio put that on a thumb drive and ran it up to Kate's office while Akroyd added in the data from the handheld unit and worked at getting the map more accurate still.

He had to wait ten minutes in a line outside Kate's office. She looked frazzled, her hair disarrayed, her desk a mess, piles of printouts in tottering stacks on her credenza. She popped in Norio's thumb drive and they took a look. Four distinct concentrations of sulfur were visible. One was the Crater rock area; three were to the north side of the mountain.

"No venting there?" she said, pointing to the western slope.

He shook his head. "Not a thing."

"I wonder what's going on," she said, shaking her head. "We'll know more by tomorrow morning, when we get all the teams in and a chunk of data from the new north monitoring station."

"You don't have that up already?"

"Just got it working," she said. "Thank Akroyd for me, and the two of you come up when you have it all processed. I'll get this much out on email to everyone."

"So the LIDAR isn't back in?" he asked, wanting to see the report on other gasses.

"Not yet."

Norio hurried back to the gas lab and helped Akroyd process the rest of the data, double checking the two instruments' readings against each other and entering the numbers into mapping software. When the other team came in from the eastern half of the mountain, they worked together. By eight in the evening they had clear, detailed maps. The volcano was waking. But if it was going to erupt, no one could pinpoint where. Not yet, at least. *When* was an impossible call, but when usually was.

The unique mystery here was the absence of a clear bulge, like the one on Mt. St. Helens in 1980. The satellite had detected a spot of warmth to the west, though the temperature increase was slight--if he were a betting man, he might bet on it.

By the end of the day, the consensus around the CVO office was

that it was too early for an eruption. People who had been working for 30 straight hours went home to shower and sleep.

Again, Norio went home with Akroyd after 9:00, anxious to get into the air as soon as possible the following morning. Akroyd's wife warmed dinner for them and joined them at the dining table.

To his surprise, the kid came in and sat with them, too, the iPod headphone cords dangling around his neck. "Do you know Gamera?" he asked Norio.

"Jake!" the mother said, blushing.

"Isn't he Japanese?" said the kid, pointing a thumb at Norio. Jake, so a boy. He was androgynous-looking, thin and long-haired.

Norio said, "I'm American but my mother was born in Japan. My father was born in Baltimore. I know Gamera, though. I prefer the robot movies, like *Majingā Zetto and Jette Jaga*."

"Cool," said Jake. "I like the old Gamera best. Better than the new one."

Norio nodded. "Me, too."

"Can you watch them in Japanese? Understand it, I mean?"

"No, I'm not quite that fast with hearing it. My mom mostly spoke English at home." He read Japanese fairly well, as Japanese scientists were at the forefront of volcano research. He liked knowing the content of those articles upon publication, before translations were widely available.

He spent a surprisingly pleasant meal talking with Jake about monster movies. The kid had a lot of informed opinions on special effects. Finally, the mother hustled the kid off to bed.

"Thanks for entertaining Jake," said Akroyd.

"Wouldn't have done it if I wasn't enjoying it," said Norio.

Akroyd shook his head and smiled, conflicting messages that Norio couldn't tease apart enough to understand. "We should call into the office and see if there's any news."

Norio made the call. Kate said the harmonic quakes continued to be sporadic. If nothing changed, she'd consider rescinding the evacuation advisory for the weekend. Plenty of complaints had been voiced about the evacuations already, she said, but the Forest Service would still keep everything above the timberline closed to hikers and skiers for now. Everyone at the office, VDAP, police in the area, the FAA, all agreed that would be a good plan, just the right level of caution. The media and public would complain, but they always do.

Certainly nothing was going to happen any time soon, everyone knowledgeable agreed.

As it turned out, everyone was wrong.

Section III: The Day

Dawn. Friday, June 14. The Mountain.

Reid Glacier is nearly one-quarter melted. On the surface, white ice still glows in the early morning light. But beneath that, close to the mountain's rock, are millions of gallons of water. Gravity had spilled some down the hill already, but until now, the westernmost part of the glacier has stayed intact, functioning as a natural dam for the expanding buried lake.

Overnight the clouds have cleared. This morning, were you standing on the glacier, its sweeping white lines of its ridges would stand stark against the vast sky, a sky moving from black to midnight blue to a rich cerulean.

Were you standing on the glacier appreciating that color, and you knew what was about to happen, happen any second now, you could not save yourself. No one can run that fast.

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On the western side of the mountain, McNeil Point.

Ellen woke that morning in her sleeping bag next to Ty in his. Dawn's gray light filtered into the tent. She looked over at Ty, still sleeping, and smiled to see him there.

After their day in Portland, Ty had convinced her over a supper of Reuben sandwiches to go with him on the two-day hike. She felt safe with him, and she didn't hesitate at all before saying "yes."

Her plan for June had been to move on north after a couple of days on Hood, to visit Mt. St. Helens on the way up, drive all the way up to Bellingham then slowly make her way south, visiting all the mountains with lodges and any others that appealed. If she wanted to keep to that plan, she should forget about Ty. But Bellingham and a month of driving the mountains was only a plan, and she didn't want to forget about him. She liked him.

"I'm not acclimated to the altitude," she had warned him.

"We'll take it slow. In fact, I know of a hike that's only eight miles. We'll do that, camp early, take a spur hike the second day if we feel like it."

"You're not one of those guys who make walking together into some sort of competition, are you?"

He grinned at her. "We'll take it slow," he said again, and she had

understood in an intuitive flash that he thought she was still afraid of him and was guaranteeing more than a slow walking pace. Nice guy. But not fake-nice or boring-nice. Kind. Empathic. The right sort of nice.

The hike had taken them through thick woods and uphill at a sharp angle. She had to move slowly in the thin air, but he stopped often for her to catch her breath. On a patch of snow, he guided her with care, managing to be helpful but not condescending. The snow--ice, really--was scary, for the ground off the trail fell sharply away from it. Had she slipped, she might have slid down a hundred feet of rock-studded slope, but she got across the ice without incident, moving carefully, and with his help.

"Excellent," he said, once she was on solid ground. They walked side by side. "It's clear of ice and snow for this time of year. Maybe the rains have melted it all away."

"I thought Oregon was always rainy."

"Only west of the mountains, and usually only until April. This has been a lousy wet May," he said.

"Doesn't it depress you, all that rain?"

"It does, a bit, but the summers make it worth it." He looked up at the clouds. "I think the weather may clear by tonight."

He led them off the main path onto what looked like nothing more than an animal trail. "There's a cave I want to show you."

"We're not really equipped for caving, are we?"

"Not that kind of cave," he said. "It's an old lava tube. Very old, probably hundreds of years."

A few hundred yards down the narrow track, he turned left toward a small black opening into the hillside. He had to duck to enter. He beckoned her on.

Curiosity pulled her forward. After the entrance, the cave opened up into a ten-foot-diameter cylinder of rough rock, and Ty could stand. His voice echoed as he said. "You can see in the rear where it has collapsed. This won't be here for much longer."

"As long as it doesn't collapse today."

"It'll happen soon, but soon in geological time, not today," he said, moving deeper into the tube. "There, see ahead?"

Where he pointed, the rough dark rock had collapsed into a pile of nasty-looking jagged rubble.

"Geez, it's cold in here," she said.

"Yeah, it's a little pocket, and air doesn't move much in or out through that small opening. Nothing nicer on a hot August afternoon than to come in here and have lunch." He looked so pleased at showing her this, she couldn't help but feel happy too.

"So there was lava here?"

"A bit. This isn't that kind of volcano, like a Hawai'ian one. It erupts ash and pumice for the most part, only rarely is there flowing lava. And it's not smooth lava at all, like you'd see in Hawai'i." He touched the jagged rock wall in illustration. "The outer layer cools, becomes rock, and the hotter lava flows through it and out, leaving this."

"But it's dormant now, right? The volcano?"

"No, they're all active, the whole Cascade Range. There was extra steaming a month ago on Hood. It goes on all the time."

"That doesn't sound good."

"It's like tornado season back in Nebraska. You know they're possible, but one has never hit you, right?"

That was so. She'd never even seen a funnel cloud in person.

After fifteen minutes of poking around, they left the lava tube and made their way back to the main trail. They came to the high end of the trail at a rustic stone building made of flat gray rocks, gray like the graphite of a pencil. Since none of the rocks sitting around on the ground were that flat, it must have taken someone a good while to find the right shape stones, drag them here, and build this.

Above them, trees were absent; they had reached the timberline. They were looking close up at the outline of Mt. Hood, glacier-covered and majestic. It must have been a stunning sight on a clear day, with blue sky behind it, but it was impressive enough with the top disappearing into cloud.

They found an open spot in the meadow beyond the little structure and sat side by side facing away from the summit, and they talked. They made camp early, and once the tent was up, they sat in it, out of the cooling breeze, and kissed.

Her lips felt dry and cracked from the altitude and cool from the ambient temperature, but soon enough, they were moist and warm and tingling. Without her being aware of willing them to move, her arms went around his neck and she pulled them both down onto her bag, and the kiss went on and on. He was the one who broke away first. "You kiss really well," he said, breathing hard.

A feeling of satisfaction at the compliment joined the other glow, a complicated mix of arousal and hope and real pleasure in Ty's company. Was there anything as wonderful in life as new romance? If there were, she had yet to experience it.

About 90% of her wanted to pull him back into another kiss, to strip off his clothes, to have her way with him. But a rational 10% told her to pay attention to what was happening, to think, to not decide something so important in this brain-numbered state.

"You, too," she said. "Kiss nicely, I mean."

"It's been a while, so that's good to hear." He shook his head and

gave a wry grin. "Let's finish making camp, 'k?"

She smiled and nodded, not wanting to talk more, wanting to preserve, with silence, the lovely feeling. They finished setting up camp, had a light supper of ramen noodles with canned chicken, and he identified several wildflowers for her, though few were fully open in the cloudy, failing light. Before they had gone to sleep, they had kissed again, lying next to each other in their separate sleeping bags, driving each other again to a state of excitement, but they had backed off before it went further. And she had slept well.

And now, in the morning, she was glad they hadn't done more. She wanted to--oh, she had wanted to--but there was something sweet, and safe, and good about not moving too fast.

Ty made a noise and his face twitched as he stirred to wakefulness. She had an urge to roll over onto him seduce him before he was fully awake. She was smiling at the thought when his eyes popped open, and he smiled back at her. "How can you be so beautiful in the morning?" he said, his voice rough with sleep.

She laughed. "You don't need lines like that. I like you already."

"Not a line," he said, "Just a truth." He reached over and stroked her hair once, and then let his hand drop to the edge of her bag. She could smell wood smoke on his fingertips. "How'd you sleep?"

"Amazingly well. I usually toss and turn on the ground when I'm camping, but the last couple days must have worn me out. How about you?"

"Dreamt a lot," he said. "I always do at altitude, vivid, strange dreams."

"Really?"

"Yeah, it's like my own, odd version of altitude sickness, these wild images all night. I wake up, but only halfway, then slide back down into sleep, and there's some other scary thing awaiting me."

"Remember any?"

"Only the last. Gotterdammerung," he said.

"Pardon?"

"You know, the Wagner opera, the Twilight of the Gods? I dreamed I was watching it, but not as a play, as a participant. There were gods walking around me, like Vikings. Thunder, lightning. Ice." He frowned.

"Your mind sounds like a fun place to live."

"Usually I like it here. But I could do without the altitude dreams." His frown eased. "Ready for breakfast? I brought some granola bars. We could make tea."

They were soon dressed in layers against the cold, sipping tea, sharing three different granola bars under a beautiful blue sky when she felt a deep rumble, a slow shivering of the earth.

"What's that?" she said.

"Avalanche, I think." He looked up at the mountain and studied it. "Not above us, though. Somewhere to the south."

"Are we okay here?"

"Sure," he said. "We're on a ridge. But someone hiking over that way a few miles may be in trouble."

She liked that he sounded like he cared. Not in some fake, watch the news and say oh isn't it horrible way, let's pretend we care and put on ribbons, tsk together in the supermarket aisle, like she had seen far too often, but like he imagined real people, with real lives, who might need help. It made her imagine them, too, and feel concern.

He might have been reading her mind. "There's a ski patrol, don't worry. People know to at least carry their cell phones and leave them on."

"I left mine in your car. I didn't think there'd be a signal."

"I have mine in my pack. There isn't a signal but rescuers can ping them, you know, find people that way."

"I didn't know. That's cool."

"Technology can be useful," he agreed, looking back at her. He did a double take. "Hey, your hair is red."

"Oh, yeah, when it's sunny, it gets some red highlights. You've only seen me in the gloom."

"It's nice," he said. "I like it."

It was a fine thing to be admired, she thought. She compared how she felt now to the stress she'd had at work at the end of the school year. Those two Ellens seemed like two different people altogether, the bitchy and unhappy Ellen who felt prematurely middle-aged, and this Ellen who felt 22 again. "Thank you," she said to Ty, and she meant the thanks for much more than the compliment. Thank you for making me feel so much better, so alive. Thanks for making it a vacation to remember.

The Mountain.

The dam of ice cracks. Great chunks of Reid Glacier fall off to the west, and a flood of melt water pours down the steep flanks of the mountain. Carrying chunks of ice and boulders, it rushes down, pulled inexorably by gravity into valleys. It strikes a hiking party of four at the timberline who had been out for three days and, like Ty and Ellen, never heard the announcement to stay off the mountain. They are crushed in seconds. A wall of water hits the tree line and snaps fifty-foot tall trees in half. Branches and whole trees join the churning debris as the thing--half avalanche, half flood--barrels down the slope. Its power lets it wash up over short ridges but it keeps seeking valleys. It finds forest roads and erases them. It strips soil so that the water turns to roiling mud. It is not merely a flood but a lahar. It finds the Sandy River valley and courses down the V of it, washing away banks, picking up more trees and boulders, hurtling towards the tiny towns of Rhododendron, Mt. Hood Village, and Brightwood, where not everyone heeded the recommended evacuation.

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The Riverside Bar and Grille, Mt. Hood Village. 7:34 a.m.

Sylvie was the only waitress on this morning, but as the place wasn't busy, she was managing.

But she didn't like the table of four snotty snowboarders at the window who clearly thought they were far cuter than they were, fueling up on pancakes and coffee and making comments that must have seemed clever to them but were just childish and irritating. Why did it take guys so long to grow up? She was near their age but felt like their mother as she put up with their crap.

She pushed into the kitchen and picked up a tomato omelet and side of wheat toast for Mr. Ramirez, one of the regulars, a shy man with a bad limp. Hip-first, she pushed back through the door, balancing the two plates on one arm so she could grab the coffee pot, too.

Then a huge pine smashed through the front window, decapitating one of the snowboarders, and a wall of water rushed in, ferociously fast. Sylvie dropped the plates and screamed. Mr. Ramirez never even

got a chance to turn around. They were crushed when the building around them collapsed. The few who survived the collapse suffocated moments later in the torrent of mud.

^^^

Cascades Volcano Observatory, Vancouver, Washington. 7:41 a.m.

Norio was hanging out in the glass-walled front room, waiting for Akroyd to finish getting the instruments back on board the helicopter and for their chance to finally go and see the mountain in clear skies when one of the female hydrologists flew into Kate's office, yelling. Norio followed her to the doorway, where the woman was waving her hands and saying, "Gone! Just freakin' gone!"

"Calm yourself," said Kate sharply. "From the beginning."

"One minute, the upper gauge on the Sandy was rising, and then bam, it was gone. We thought, what's going on, some problem with it? But then the second one--"

"Lahar." The head seismologist, Barner, pushed past Norio, who slid forward to lean against the wall inside the doorway. "Avalanche I called up to you a few minutes ago, and I swear it's a lahar we've been seeing. Certain of it, now that I'm hearing about the gauges. No eruption or big quake, but a lahar anyway."

Kate got up, walked past him, and Norio fell in behind, trailing her out the front door. Barner, the woman hydrologist, and he joined her in staring toward Mt. Hood, half-expecting to see an ash cloud. That's the way it was supposed to go with Cascades eruptions. First, an ash/magma eruption, blast wave, hot ash rises, some hot ash falls out of column creating *nuee ardente* that rush down the mountain, a lahar forms because of hot pyroclasts melting the snow, the ash cloud tops out and the lighter ash drifts with the prevailing winds. That was textbook.

But they were looking right at the mountain. No ash cloud. Either the lahar was from the heavy rains this spring or...or what? The helicopter sat at the edge of the parking lot, the pilot looking curiously at the four of them.

Kate strode back inside and Norio followed. She got behind her desk and pulled up current--or slightly delayed, as the data was collected and sent only every fifteen minutes--western flank seismograms on her computer. "It's still--" she began, but she never finished. Everyone crowded behind her desk to see. The waving line at the end of the transmission told the story of a steady shake. "Yeah. That's a lahar. A big one." She looked to the woman from hydrology. "You think it was big enough to snap off the antennae?"

"I think it took out the whole gauge system."

"Carol!" she called to her assistant. "Get me Mt. Hood Village and Sandy chiefs of police on the phone. Then Gresham and Trout River, in that order. Right now! Then get VDAP up here. All of them."

"What's up?" came Akroyd's voice from behind him.

"Lahar speeding down the Sandy River," Norio told him.

"Shit," said Akroyd, his eyes wide.

Kate snapped her head up. "You two, get in the air right now. Fly up the Sandy. Radio me as soon as you see it, get me an estimate of speed and the GPS numbers for the leading edge."

The hydrologist spoke up. "Based on how long between the two lost signals, 100 kph up there." She blanched. "It'll slow with grade change of course, but..." She trailed off.

Kate looked at Norio again. "Get going!" He and Akroyd hurried out.

As they passed her, Carol called to Kate, "Got the Sandy police chief on line two. Mt. Hood Village, no answer. Gresham says theirs is in a meeting."

"Get him out of the meeting! Christ!" Kate shouted.

Norio sprinted out the door and yelled to the pilot. "Get it started! We need to go, *now*." He couldn't stop himself from smiling. This was exciting.

The pilot stared at him blankly for a second then jumped in and began to poke at his instrument panel, pulling on his headset one-handed.

Akroyd lagged behind, but they were both inside and belted in before the rotor came to life overhead. Norio put on his headset and said to the pilot. "Go over to Troutdale and fly up the Sandy River, as fast as you can. Max it out."

The chopper lifted and pivoted south, the pilot talking to air traffic control as he gained speed. "Tell them it's an emergency if you need to," said Norio. "Tell them to..." He wanted to say, divert all traffic away from the volcano, in case an eruption is coming, but that was Kate's call, not his. He shook his head. "Nothing. Never mind." It might only be a lahar, independent of eruptive activity entirely. Rainy spring like this, it was possible.

The pilot got them over the Columbia River and its little islands, and over Troutdale in Oregon where they caught the mouth of the Sandy. They flew up the river. Norio was thinking, come on come on, hurry up, but he knew the pilot was moving as quickly as the machine could go. They passed Gresham, and the land beneath them rose. Houses became sparser and concentrated only in the river valley. "Is that Sandy, the town, already?" asked Akroyd, as they came upon a concentration of houses and a tiny airfield. A number of cars filled the

road--maybe someone had gotten the evacuation started that quickly.

"Yeah," said the pilot. "The airport and the edge of town. The central town is south, over there." He pointed. Norio lifted his gaze and saw the thicker cluster of houses. Damn lucky they had built most of the town well off the river.

The pilot steered them up the increasingly curvy river course and there, in the distance, Norio saw the leading edge of the lahar, a gray, tree-studded deluge churning down the river valley. "See it?" he asked the pilot, pointing.

"Damn! What the hell is it?"

"Lahar," said Akroyd. "I want to text my wife," and he clicked off the radio.

"How far is it from there to that little airport we just passed, do you think?" Norio asked the pilot.

"Ten miles, maybe?"

"Okay, get to the leading edge of the thing and pace it down river, try to get a rough speed on the thing. And can we get patched through to CVO on your radio or--never mind, I'll use mine." He dug his radio and Bluetooth out, stuck the ear bud in one ear, leaving the other ear under the headphones so he could hear the pilot and Akroyd, and radioed in to the CVO, asking for Kate. She came right on.

"It's ten miles from the outskirts of Sandy. I'll give you the speed in a couple minutes." He looked down. "People need to head into the town proper," he said. "If they live close to the river, you need to tell them to evacuate up the sides of the valley."

He could barely hear Kate with the sound of the helicopter. "Done," she said.

"They're going to die if they're within a few hundred feet of the river. This is a huge lahar. A monster." It spread well beyond the banks of the river. The few trees on the banks that it hadn't pulled down were big, sturdy ones, standing now in several feet of mudflow. The pilot had reached the leading edge of the flow and spun the 'copter around. "Hold on," Norio said to Kate.

The pilot paced the lahar, looking out his window and back at his gauges. "About forty miles an hour," he said. The front of the wave crashed along, uprooting trees, yanking a cabin fully into the flow; it was fast and dangerous, a wild thing.

Norio said into the radio, "Sixty-five kilometers per hour. Sixteen clicks to Sandy Airport. So fifteen minutes to get that neighborhood evacuated." He felt himself flushing; he hadn't needed to do the arithmetic for her. Kate could divide by four.

Kate's voice was replaced by the woman hydrologist's. "Kate says thanks; she's talking to the Sandy police right now. Can you fly back up over the lahar's track? Give me more details?"

Norio conveyed the request to the pilot, who was looking grim.

Akroyd came back on the headset. "I'm too much a gas guy. I forget the formulas. How much will it slow?"

Norio calculated slope and flow roughly. "Might only hit the Columbia at twenty miles per hour or so."

"Fast enough," muttered Akroyd. "I'm so glad our house is well away from the river."

In silence, they flew up the Sandy River Valley. Mud and debris filled the valley, in a mile-wide swath at points. Whole blocks of the little tourist villages that had been there at dawn were obliterated.

"I'm swinging over to Welches," the pilot said, and they drifted south of the river valley at a place it jogged north. Another little village was under them, flooded, but barely, it looked like, with signs of people moving easily on the streets. They couldn't evacuate west now. The road out was gone.

"Stick with the Sandy River--no need to do the Zig Zag right now," Norio said, and the pilot veered north again, following the river valley uphill. They took it all the way up to the origin, and when they arrived, it became obvious where the lahar had started. Massive chunks of ice were strewn where they'd been flung out from the source of the lahar.

"Wow," said Akroyd. "Look at the avalanche track."

"You're missing half a glacier," said the pilot.

"I wonder what the volume of water was," said Akroyd.

"Or will be," said Norio. "There's plenty new coming down." Fresh water overlaid the destruction, a new, bigger river cascading down over the mess of the transformed Sandy. As they watched, the glacier calved a new section and the flow of water cascaded over it, around it, rushing from the force of gravity and around any obstacle to get where it was going: into the river valley. The calved bit tumbled downhill, as if in slow motion.

"Hang right here on top of the start of it for a second," said Akroyd. "I want gas readings while we've got the chance." He'd managed to grab the COSPEC.

The helicopter hovered in one place while Akroyd collected data then directed the pilot upslope another quarter-mile. In the near distance, three thin plumes of steam rose from the mountain's peak, definitely not the ones from yesterday. New gas sources.

Not simply a random spring flood lahar. He was willing to bet it was much more. "Can we go over there?" he asked the pilot, pointing to the rising steam in the distance.

"Need fuel soon," he said. "I only had half of a tank to start. We should fuel up and come back."

Norio glanced at his watch, amazed to see they'd been up an hour

already. It seemed far less. He thought about it, felt the pull of the steam plumes and the secrets they might hold, but said, "Okay, go back to Gresham in a straight line, then follow the lahar down to the Columbia before fueling up. Got enough fuel for that?"

The pilot nodded.

"We'll come right back to the peak after that. Sound good, Akroyd?"

"I want to get over that steam," said Akroyd. "There's no sulfur right here. There may be other plumes we can't see. So yeah, ASAP, get right back up here, get over the visible venting. Unless Kate says otherwise."

The pilot swung them back down across the land, cutting off the loops of the river, back to the outskirts of the town of Sandy. Neighborhoods they had just passed over were gone, replaced by mud and trees poking from the mud every which way. A small plane from the airport was canted onto one wing with a log punched through the fuselage. Bridge supports stuck out into thin air, and the remnants of the bridge's deck were nowhere to be seen. The pilot said, "That's Ten Eyck Road, I think, where the bridge was." At the edges of the destruction, Norio saw an overturned RV and, further down, a log truck twisted ninety degrees from the road, still upright but with its load spilled onto the road. Mud still surged around it, nudging it downhill.

"I hope everyone got out of that valley," the pilot said. They could all see that was a vain hope.

"Rafting," said Akroyd. "I mean, people float that river in the summer, raft it, canoe it. I wonder if there were any out this morning."

They caught up with the lahar's leading edge just after Gresham. It had spread out and slowed as the land flattened out. Neighborhood streets far from the river bed were coated in mud, and they could also see many people there standing on top of their cars, safe for now. The helicopter hovered over the leading edge and Norio watched it churn through the low valley, cutting off a big loop of the old river course and making a new one through a suburban neighborhood, carrying off cars and whole house sections before tearing them into lumber scraps. Norio got back on the radio and described what he was seeing to whoever was listening at the CVO. As he watched, roads were washed away and bridges collapsed. It hit Interstate 84 and peeled away the multi-lane concrete bridge like it was made of balsa wood. They watched it enter the Columbia River, cross the river, dump debris up onto an island. It took out another bridge that spanned from the Washington side to the island.

"That's Route 14," said Akroyd. "It's crossing into Camas." And the lahar did, spreading out upstream and downstream into the broader

Columbia as well, but the momentum taking some of it directly north and into the low-lying areas of the small town on the Washington side. Houses were pierced by logs, and cars were swept into the mud, spinning and being pushed northward. Small figures ran but too slowly. How many people could run sixteen miles an hour?

"People are dying," grated Akroyd. Norio looked back to see tears in the man's eyes. Norio felt a cold shock at the destruction but also a thrill that he was witnessing this. The ever-changing earth in action. It was awe-inspiring.

"We need fuel, and now," said the pilot. As he said this, two other helicopters came into view, news choppers with the station call letters painted on them. Everyone back at CVO would be able to see the destruction on the TV soon enough.

Once on the ground, he turned on the DOAS mounted outside and called Kate on his cell phone and reported in, mentioning the news choppers. Ahead of him, a windsock fluttered toward the southeast. He wondered if the wind direction and speed was the same at higher levels--no clouds to help him judge that.

"We have remote imaging from three hours ago," Kate said, "and we'll get more later this afternoon. There's a slight additional bulge just north of the central peak and thermal signals from the north. We think a western magma chamber may have melted the glacier."

Amazing. "We saw new gas plumes. What do you want us to do next?"

"Go north to look at the bulge and get GPS and gas readings on the new plumes you saw. I'll text you GPS coordinates for everything the remotes saw, right after I hang up. Stay within range of cell towers until you get them."

"Good." They rang off, and Norio watched Akroyd walk across him from the building.

"Finally got a hold of my kid at home," he said.

"Oh, good," Norio said. He probably should have asked about Akroyd's family. "They'll be fine, though, right? Your house is nowhere near the river."

"Yeah, but I wanted to make sure the kid wasn't down there for some reason. I told the wife I figured there'd be some panic buying, to leave work right now and shop while she could. And what if there's an eruption tomorrow or the next day? I wanted her to know."

"Ahh," said Norio. He didn't really get the need to call. It would be on the news, right? "Here comes the pilot."

"We're all set," Corey said. "Fuel for at least three and a half hours."

Norio looked at his watch. 9:48. They'd get a lot done this trip. He looked forward to gaining more knowledge. The lahar had been a rare event. What else was going on with that mountain?

Camas, Washington, 8:28 a.m.

Chad gripped the box cutter and with a practiced swipe took the top off a box of Safeway canned French-style green beans. The box was two-thirds shelved when he heard the siren coming from outside, faint, barely reaching into the store. When it didn't stop after a few seconds or change pitch, he paused in his work.

Down the aisle from him, J--for Javier, but he went by the initial--was stocking canned tomatoes. He looked up and said to Chad, "what's that?"

It wasn't fire. It wasn't police. "I think maybe it's the siren at the paper mill."

"What's it mean?"

"Accident there, probably." Some sort of toxic chemical spill? He imagined the guys at the firehouse flying into action and felt a wash of emotions so twisted up, he found hard to tell them apart from one another. Jealousy, anger, sadness.

He felt stupid, too, for reacting so strongly to one overheard insult, but he had been fixated on what he had heard Kane say at the station for two days. He hadn't slept well for lying there while his mind went round and round. Combined with his failure in the physical test, he was, for the first time, asking himself if maybe he didn't want to fight fires, if he should look to some other future for himself. He was shocked at himself, at how easily a lifelong dream had been called into question from a couple of minor blows in a row. That made him think maybe he didn't have the strength of character to do the job anyway. Lower and lower his confidence dropped. And now, stacking cans, he was doing it again. Maybe shoving cans onto shelves and sweeping up popcorn was all he was good for. *Stop it.*

By the time the box was empty and the older cans neatly stacked at the front of the shelf, all the labels facing forward, the siren still hadn't cut off. "I wonder what's going on," he said to J, who gave an uninterested shrug. Chad broke down the box and added it to the stack of flattened ones at the bottom of his cart, slipped the knife back in his pocket, and pushed the cart out of the customer area and through the double hinged doors into the stock room.

His supervisor, Yancey, was entering stock into the computer. "Have a radio?" Chad asked him.

"iPod in my desk," Yancey said, not looking up.

Chad shook his head. "I want A.M. 1670." The emergency channel. "I'm going to run out to my car for a second," he said.

Yancey glanced over. "Taking a break?"

"I want to hear what the siren is about."

"What siren?" Yancey said.

Chad realized that here in the storeroom, it was inaudible. "Be right back and let you know." He went to his locker and grabbed his car keys and went outside, where the siren was much louder, droning on and on. He walked to the edge of the lot where the employees parked. Traffic sped by him, the siren not seeming to have altered the patterns of the morning rush hour. He got in his old beater Civic and turned the key to auxiliary. Now he was glad he had the beater, with the crappy old radio that made it easy to punch in the station.

--avalanche of mud and rocks. Estimated time of arrival at mouth of Columbia, 10:25. Recommend evacuation of the following areas." Then came a long list of mountain towns, Troutdale, Washougal, and Camas. Everything on the Sandy River. Everything low-lying, which meant the landing, the sewage treatment plant, the paper mill, over by the community center, and nearly all of downtown Camas, where his house was. Where the Safeway was.

Chad listened to the announcement finish, his heart speeding. The announcer started up again: "A large lahar has been detected on the Sandy River. A lahar is dangerous flood and mudflow, triggered by rain or glacial melting and an avalanche of mud and rocks. Estimated time of arrival--" When he realized the announcement was repeating, he shut it off.

He jumped out, slammed the car door and glanced south, towards the Columbia River, though of course he could see nothing, not even the river itself. Chad ran back inside, the wail of the siren through the streets sounding more menacing now. The normal traffic and customers wandering through the parking lot worried him. He wanted to tell them all to stop what they were doing and listen, to leave the area. But first things first.

He ran into the storeroom and yelled at Yancey. "We have to close the store and get out of here."

"What?" Yancey said, but Chad ran through the doors and up to the customer service desk.

He skidded to a halt. "Where's Mr. Fonville?"

Megan, the frizzy-haired woman on duty, said, "I don't know. Did you check his office?"

Chad sped down the short hallway to bang on the manager's closed office door, but there was no answer. No light gleamed around the edges of the door. He went back to customer service. "Page him," he said.

"Don't order me around."

"Page him!" Chad said. "It's an emergency."

"What kind--"

"For pity's sake, just page him!"

Megan's mouth snapped shut and she clicked on the P.A. "Would Mr. Fonville please come to the customer service desk? Fonville to customer service."

"Say emergency."

"As soon as possible," she said into the P.A., glaring at Chad before clicking it off. The repetitive sale announcement tape cut back in. "I can't say 'emergency' on the P.A. It might scare people. What in heaven's name is going on? Why are you acting so rude? That isn't like you, Chad."

Chad shook his head and paced in a circle until he saw Mr. Fonville coming towards him. He ran over to him and poured out the news.

"Son, what are you talking about?"

"Just--" Chad shoved a hand through his hair. "Look, turn on the radio to 1670, AM dial. Then call the police and ask them what to do. Will you please just do that? It's really important."

"I'm certain you misunderstood, but I will turn on the radio."

"Do it now," said Chad, and turned to Megan. "Call the police and ask what's wrong. Just do it," he repeated to her, and then he ran back through a closed checkout and turned into the freezer aisle.

"Don't run in the store!" came Mr. Fonville's voice.

Chad ignored him. He banged through to the storeroom. "I'm taking the rest of the day off," he said to Yancey. "Get up to the office and talk to Fonville now."

Yancey put down his UPC scanner. "What's going on, Chad?"

"An emergency. He'll explain. Take it seriously, even if no one else does. I know I can trust you to do the right thing." Chad slammed out the back door and ran to his car. He had to do the right thing, too. He was still auxiliary fire, at least until he handed in a resignation, and he was going to do whatever he could to help.

^ ^ ^

Driving past, he could see the firehouse was crazy busy. The bay doors were both open and he could see a half-dozen guys loading up the engines and ambulances with supplies. He drove beyond the firehouse to Dallas Street, went up the hill, and found a place to park where his car would be up and out of the likely evacuation zone. It was a beater, but it was *his* beater and he couldn't afford to replace it. He remembered to take off his store vest and nametag before he left the car. Digging under the passenger seat, he found an old muddy pair of hightop sneakers, kicked off his black dress shoes and tugged on the

others. He sprinted the five blocks downhill to the firehouse.

As he arrived, he could see Francie in her car driving past him, pulling into the parking lot and out of his sight. He walked into the firehouse and edged around the busy crew, stopping to ask A.J. who was in charge. It was Rick Mausch, and Chad found him in the communications center, on the landline.

"I hear you, chief," Mausch said into the receiver. "I will," and he slammed down the phone.

"What can I do?" Chad said.

Mausch glanced around. "Uhh, not sure. I'll think on it." He said to the man at the communications desk, "Do they know if it's full county coordination or east county only?" As he waited for an answer, he turned back to Chad. "Hey, could you make sure the coffee's topped up? I know it's not very exciting."

"I'll do anything," Chad said. He hurried to the kitchen and spent five minutes pouring out dregs of coffee, swirling water through the carafes, and setting up new to drip. He made an executive decision to bypass the decaf. He watched as the coffee dripped. Weird, the sight was so slow and calm and normal, but inside, he was thrumming like a race engine, his adrenaline all pumped up with nowhere to go.

Francie came in and said, "Is there any--?" She saw the coffee and said, "Bless you. I just got woken up by the phone call." She grabbed a carafe, and stuck a mug under the stream of coffee.

"I wish there was something I could do to help," he said.

"You ask the battalion commander?"

"He said make coffee."

She replaced the carafe and blew on her mug. "Gotta be something you can do. You're efficient. Maybe you can field public questions on the phone, free someone else up. You're good with people."

"I am?"

She looked surprised. "Sure, you don't know that?"

He shook his head. He'd been slamming himself in his thoughts so much the last couple days, he had no sense of what he was good at any more.

She sipped at her coffee, made a face. "Too hot," she said. She opened the freezer and grabbed an ice cube and popped it in the mug. "I gotta go, Chad." She walked into the dining area, her mug to her mouth, and Chad was left alone to watch the coffee continue to drip.

Kane pushed through the kitchen door. "What are you doing here?" His voice was strained and pitched high.

"My job," Chad said, straightening his spine. "Helping."

Kane shook his head, face sour. "Gotta get something for my stomach," he muttered and pulled open a cabinet. He grabbed a handful of wheat crackers and left the box on the counter. He left

without another word.

Chad put away the crackers. Then he considered what might happen in the next few hours. Depending on how serious the lahar was, how long it lasted, they'd all be busy, maybe all day. They could miss meals, would need something on the go. He went through the cabinets and found granola bars and wrapped peanut butter crackers, like those you'd get from a vending machine. He grabbed a box of Ding-Dongs, thought, no, too squishy, hunted for anything else wrapped, self-contained, and able to survive in a jacket pocket or damp environment. He pulled a bag of apples from the fridge and a bag of string cheese. He stacked all this portable food onto a big round tray and took it out to the dining room to put at the center of the table. A cup was sitting there, empty, and he took that back and washed it.

He wanted to *do* something. Reminding himself to stay out of the way, not bother anyone, not be a pest, he went down to the garage and backed into a corner to watch the loading. One engine pulled away, turning right, lights on but siren silent. Next, one of the ambulances pulled out, turning left. Probably deployed to different ends of the city.

Kane came from the men's room hallway, saw Chad, and altered his path to come to him. "Why don't you just go home? "

"Home is nearer the river than here."

"Then follow the evacuation route like all the other civilians." This instruction might have been said in a caring way, but Kane's tone was not at all that. He was irked, and on his way to angry.

"I feel like this is where I'm suppose to be."

"It's not," snapped Kane.

Chad dropped his gaze. The words echoed what he'd been thinking the last few days. He wasn't supposed to be here, and he wasn't supposed to be a firefighter. He felt embarrassed at first. Then he felt a wave of anger moving up from his gut through his chest. Who was this guy to tell him where he should be? Not the battalion commander. That's who got to tell him when to come and go. He had to clamp his teeth together from snapping a rude reply. Around him, the voices seemed louder and louder. Metal banged against metal. Doors slammed shut.

In the midst of all this noise a sudden light came to Chad, from a source he could not identify, and both his shame and anger were swept away by something else, curiosity. Logic. Calm. His brows drew together. "Why are you acting this way?" He didn't ask nastily. In fact, he didn't expect Kane to answer. It was more like he was asking himself. Why would Kane have taken against him, and when had it started, and what was in it for Kane? He wondered if Kane himself

knew those answers.

Kane's face grew red, and his mouth worked, but he said nothing.

It seemed as if Chad had handed over his flushed face and his consternation to the other man. The shift felt like a physical object had passed between them, a burden transferred from Chad to Kane. And good riddance to it.

Then the battalion commander's voice called, "Keppler! Chad, get back in here."

He left Kane still gaping like a trout. He went into the rear and straightened his spine as he stopped in front of Mausch. "Yes sir?" he said.

"Figured out something you can do," said Mausch, handing him a radio. He turned and rummaged in a tall metal cabinet. He found and handed over to Chad a pair of binoculars. Next he tugged a loop of three keys off a hook. "Here's your job, and it's important. Get up on the roof, face south, and radio down what you're seeing. It's the southwest staircase, hit the emergency door on this level and go on up. There'll be a metal door at the top. One of these two keys will unlock it."

"Yes sir."

"You know how to work the radio?"

"I do," said Chad and he turned to go.

"Wait," said Mausch. He went to the garage and grabbed a yellow and black vest with "Fire" stenciled on the back, and handed it to Chad. "Things are likely to get crazy soon. Anyone in the public asks for more than you can do, say you're auxiliary and find one of us if you need to. Don't overstep, right?"

"Yes sir," he said, slipping on the vest, proud to be wearing it.

"Good man," said Mausch and clapped him on the shoulder. "Go."

As he passed Francie carrying a plastic box under one arm, she flashed him a thumbs up, and he banged through the firehouse door and into the administrative building. Out the door, up the stairs. The roof door lock yielded easily to the first key he tried.

The black asphalt roof was studded with equipment--exhaust fans and satellite dishes and unidentifiable pipes and metal boxes. He got to the corner that faced due south. Cars were headed out of downtown, up the hill, but not nearly as many as there should be, not enough to hold everybody who was living or working downtown. People hadn't heard or they had heard but weren't evacuating. Beyond town, the Columbia River where it lapped up against the wharf looked normal--high this spring, but not flood stage. Lady Island, the rest of the river, and Troutdale: all normal for an Oregon spring day. Far to the southeast, beyond a blue swath of foothill, Mount Hood's white top gleamed against a crystal blue sky. He lifted the binoculars to his

face and scanned, starting at Troutdale. Nothing yet. He kept scanning upriver until he lost the track of its course. He moved the binoculars back to Troutdale, where he saw more signs of evacuation there. The interstate traffic looked normal. No one had set up a roadblock over the bridge, so they must know it was safe. Downtown in Camas, near the Liberty Theater, he picked out a cop car going slowly, maybe announcing evacuation orders through a bullhorn. He could see people, a few in the upper stories of apartment buildings leaning out their windows and looking around. So the news was getting out--good.

His radio came to life. A voice he didn't recognize said. "Anything happening on the roof? Over."

"Nothing," Chad said. "Some evacuation activity. Nothing on the river. Over."

He turned back to the Oregon side and, through the binoculars, pushed his field of vision again up the Sandy. The view hazed out and he backed up to a spot he could see clearly.

Then the lahar came into view, faster than he would have guessed possible, quick and wide, a churning mass of gray, specked with dark debris, rushing down the river course.

As he watched, it widened further, careening around the bends of the river, taking out banks and trees and slamming into buildings with each sweep. He held the binocs one-handed and thumbed the radio. "It's coming," he said. "It's big." He braced his elbow against his side to steady the binoculars. "Okay, I think that's Gresham, now. It's going through Gresham." He watched as tiny dots of something four-legged--horses? cows?--were swept into the river. At a steep spot, a grassy bank tumbled down and fell into the flow, adding itself to the mess. All of this was happening silently, like some action-adventure movie at the Liberty where the sound went out. He half-expected an audience to start clapping and chanting for sound. "Okay," he said into the radio. "Coming into Troutdale now. Over," he said, realizing he hadn't given anyone a chance to talk back to him.

"How long? How long do we have?" It was Mausch. "Will it hit Camas?"

"Maybe five, six minutes," Chad responded. "Yes, I think it will hit us, sir. It's fast and it's high and it's got some real power behind it. I can't see this much stuff getting absorbed by the Columbia. There are whole roofs and cows and hundreds of pines. It's taking out streets in Troutdale like they were nothing." He realized his voice was rising and he got himself under control. "Over."

"Keep telling us. I'll shut up. You keep talking."

Chad pressed down the send button and talked into the radio, as professional and calm as he could manage. "The I-84 bridge is down. Cars in the river, 18-wheelers. Lahar coming onto Lady Island now." A

mass of blue herons, over a hundred, took to the air as the lahar hit the island and snapped off trees. "A big gray wedge of mud flowing into the river beyond the island. Trees piling up on Lady. The pulp mill buildings taking hits from debris. Coming over the landing." Too much was happening to say, the mess spreading up river and down. He focused on Camas's streets. "Encroachment into Camas. Cars being lifted and spun. First Ave. Second Ave. People down. Cop car just got it. Uh, you guys should get off the floor down there, right now. Get up onto the truck or go upstairs." He watched as the thing came towards him. "Now!" he insisted, although they could probably see the river of approaching mud by now themselves, only a block off and rushing up the street.

He could hear it now, too, with shattering of glass and cracking of brick and lumber. Distant screams. A pounding on the roof door behind him. He ran over and flung it open. Office workers streamed up the stairway. "One of you keep this held open," he said and ran back to the roof edge. The building was an island in a sea of gray muck. Splintered pine trees filled the city streets closest to the Columbia, but none of the big ones made it this far. Branches and lumber and a chunk of roof with shingles swirled in the street outside. A cow, spinning, dead or helpless to move. A man scrambling to his feet then slipping down again into the mud.

Bizarrely enough, the more he watched, the cooler and calmer he became. It was a little like watching a TV report of disaster on some distant continent, not like seeing his own town being inundated. He sure wouldn't be working at the Liberty or Safeway any time soon, though, unless it was to shovel out mud there, but that thought passed without raising more than a flicker of concern. He had a job to do here and now. He thumbed the radio and said, "What next? Over."

Francie's voice came over the radio. "Chad. Is it still moving inland?"

"Not as fast as it was. Wait." He moved around the building to the north corner and watched the influx of mud. Thumbing the radio, he told her how far it had gotten, naming streets and parks, verbally drawing her a map of the lahar's limits. "The river is running backwards, almost, filling up with debris. I guess it might choke the flow and it'll flood above that. The Greenway is gone, totally under. The police station might be the limit of it. I've seen houses damaged and a few smaller structures, like garages and sheds, torn entirely down. Over."

"Some of us are coming up there. Over and out," she said.

Around him, he realized that the roof had grown more crowded. Some people were crying and panicked. Half were punching at or yelling into cell phones. "Everything is okay," he called. Not the truth.

What was true? "You're okay. The worst is over. The building is fine. You're safe here."

"My house," one tearful woman said, pointing to the southwest. "My kids, are my kids okay? They're with a fourteen-year-old babysitter."

Chad called, "Anyone have something to write with?" A woman came up with a pencil and notebook out of a deep bag and told him to keep it. "Okay, anybody who has concerns about people in houses that you can see are in the flood, and you can't get through on your cell, I'll take down those addresses and pass them on to the rescuers on the ground. Not property damage worries, please. Let's focus on living people for now, get them help if they need it."

A half dozen people came up to him. He started with the crying woman, taking notes. He was on the fifth person when Mausch, Kane, Francie, and three other firefighters came through the door. He held out the binoculars for Francie and finished taking names and addresses before joining the others at the south corner of the building.

"These people just watched their homes get hit," he said, handing the notebook to Mausch. "They want reassurance that loved ones are okay. I have name, age, sex, on the people they thought were there. Nobody disabled on the list, but some kids."

Mausch took the note and handed it to Kane. "Get that down to communications and out to police when we're done here."

A woman called over. "What's wrong? The cell calls aren't going through at all now."

One of the office workers answered her before Mausch could. "Too much traffic."

Mausch muttered, "Or a tower is down. Or more than one."

Overhead, a news helicopter skimmed over them, blowing their hair and clothes.

"Great, and now they'll say, firefighters fiddle while Rome burns," said Kane.

"Yeah," said Mausch as if he didn't really care about that. He was looking southward, shading his eyes with a hand, and Chad could see that he was thinking out a strategy. In another minute he came to a decision. "This is how we'll do it. No, wait." He turned to Francie who was still scanning with the binoculars. "What do you see?"

"I think we're going to have chemical contamination from the pulp mill. There's a train off the tracks, but the cars look like stock, not tankers."

"Small favors," muttered another firefighter.

Francie lowered her voice. "I can see a few people floating in it. Bodies, I'm afraid."

Mausch took out his own radio. "Mausch here," he said. "Why isn't

that last engine out of here yet?"

A delay, then a voice. "Working on it."

Chad glanced around the town. No sign of fires at least. Not yet.

Mausch called them to attention and gave out orders in a voice firm but pitched low enough to keep the civilians from hearing. "First rule. Don't die. Don't get hurt. I won't lose any of you, and injured rescuers help no one. We're going to have to stay on foot to help folks. If there's a big backwash at some point, or a second wave, get out or up onto something stable, something big and heavy, not just a dumpster or car. You can see how cars are floating. Stay well away from them until they settle. Don't wade into anything deeper than your knees. Watch out for debris. You won't be able to see anything under the surface. Get the walking wounded out, get them to--well, hell" he said. "First aid center, where's that?"

Francie recited two addresses, both underwater now. Under mud.

"We'll coordinate a new address with the police, some place up the hill. And transportation to Vancouver's hospital if need be. And a temporary morgue," he added grimly. "Get yourself ready. Except for Francie and Chad--you two wait a second."

When the rest had gone back down the stairs he said to Chad, "You've had first aid and CPR, right?"

"And CERT, plus a bunch of FEMA CEUs on line."

"Good," Mausch said. "Be honest, both of you. You willing to work together?"

"Sure," said Francie.

"Of course," said Chad, his heart speeding up at the thought that he'd actually be able to do something here, something real and useful.

Mausch looked seriously at him. "You do everything she says, rescue and medical both. She's the EMT. You're under her command."

Chad nodded.

"Then let's go see what the windshield survey has to tell us, and we'll get everyone deployed," said Mausch, and they climbed down off the roof.

South flank of the mountain. 8:30 a.m.

Jim Vang had never been so bored. He didn't know this level of boredom was possible without it becoming a fatal condition. He was megasuperultra bored. His boredom had reached such height and breadth, it needed its own zip code. He needed to scream to release the pressure swelling inside his skull or his skull would surely explode.

Another breakfast went on and on while he was thinking this, this time a breakfast of transparent noodles and morel mushrooms they had found on their daily nature hike, a hike which was starting to feel to Jim like one of those recurring nightmares that you can't explain and haunt you for long minutes beyond waking, tainting your whole day with a cloud of misery. But this wasn't a dream, or a game, or a movie. It was his life, his boring, sucky life.

The rice noodles with morels sat in his bowl, a breakfast that had everyone around the table smiling but Jim. To him, the food tasted like old socks and cardboard. He wanted a McMuffin, and the last thing he wanted to do was smile.

Jim hated everything, hated these noodles, these trees, hated the sky beyond them that had finally cleared to blue this morning but was still a hateful thing. He wanted his friends, his games, television, funny Youtube videos, a telephone he had permission to use once again. All left behind, hostages to this terrorist called "family time."

"I can't stand this," he said, standing up. "I have to--" He flung his hands up while his mother and sister stared at him. His father's usually stoic expression turned to a frown. For his father, this was a demonstrative moment. "I need to be alone," Jim said, keeping his voice calm only by a great effort. "I'm going on a walk." He left the table and walked to the fire road. His father called his name, but Jim pretended not to hear and marched down the road.

When his family was out of sight, he felt a bit of tension leave him. Maybe he only needed some privacy. Maybe he needed to hide behind a pile of rocks and jack off to relieve some tension. But not this close to the family. No, very bad idea.

He walked all the way down to the turnoff from the larger forest road then turned on it toward the last campground they had tried but found full, however many eons ago that was. The elevation dropped and he found it easier to jog down the road than to walk it. He wasn't any kind of a jock, but the running felt good, and he opened it up, liking the feel of gravity pulling at him. He gained speed until he was almost losing control, eating up the ground, his arms whirling to keep

balance.

When he started panting, he kept going. Only when his lungs were burning painfully in the thin air did he stop. He didn't know how far he had come. When he turned around to look, the road behind him surprised him with its steepness and its length. The turnoff to their campsite was nowhere in sight. Too late, he realized he'd have to go back up that hill, too. Unless he was willing to keep running down it for miles, and then hitchhike to Seattle or San Francisco and become a street kid.

And he wasn't willing to do that. His family didn't beat him or make him wear dresses as punishment or chain him to the hot water heater when they were unhappy with him. They weren't awful. They just weren't who he wanted to be with right now.

He just wanted.... Shit. He didn't know what he wanted. No more wildflower hikes. To play a game on his iPod. A phone call from one of the guys. A computer to log onto. Such small things. Such important things.

The last time he had even talked with Tommy had been the day of school, waiting for the bus, wondering aloud together where Chee was.

"He be lagging on us," Tommy had said, scrolling through texts on his phone.

"It's that girl."

"That Rosie girl? Major biyatch, she."

"Yeah," said Jim, though he really didn't know her well enough to say if she was a bitch or an angel. Chee having a girlfriend was weird for all of them. Between that and the last couple weeks of Jim being grounded, it felt like their group was falling apart. And with summer coming, he worried they'd drift further apart.

A tough-looking black chick walked by smoking a cigarette. Tommy did a complicated thing with his eyebrows that said, "I'd take some of that."

"*Me nyuam laib*," said Jim, shaking his head.

"What's that shit you say?"

"It's Hmong. Little gangsta girl."

"Xactly. They the best."

"Go on over, then. You and Chee can take them to a club, catch a movie, the four of you."

Tommy laughed without humor. "Uhuh. Like I have money for that."

Jim let his gaze drift across the street to a crowd of younger kids walking by. "What're you doing this summer?" he asked Tommy.

"Working at the restaurant. Wiping tables and shit." He put away his cell phone. "All the shit jobs, that's for Tommy. And hardly any

money for it. Just the tips I can steal."

Steal? What if he got caught? "That sucks."

"How 'bout you?"

"Stupid camping trip with my family in a week. Gotta act all nice, maybe they'll let me out by July. If I'm lucky."

"We need to hang when they set you free. I'm off work Mondays."

"Yeah, good."

"Sometimes I hate my family." Tommy said it without shame.

"I know you do," said Jim.

"My father doesn't get it."

"No."

"It's all this home country bullshit, you know?"

"Believe me. I know."

"Nah, you don't. Your parents mostly grew up here. They speak English. My mother sounds like some comedy movie Chinawoman, ten words of English. They still back in China, in their heads."

"Yeah? You get some blindfolded shaman dude cutting up chickens and ringing bells over you last weekend? I did."

He snorted. "Only chickens we cut up, we stir-fry."

"Look at all these white kids," Jim said, casting his glance over the knots of white students waiting for the bus, talking about whatever. "They don't know."

"Don't know shit," Tommy agreed.

The bus came and they got on. Chee never showed. As he had been doing every day for two weeks, Jim took out the twisted cotton bracelet the shaman had given him and put it back on before he got home. Since he was pretty sure no demon really was trying to steal his soul, he saw no reason to wear it except to calm his father.

At Tommy's stop, they bumped hands goodbye. And that was the last time he had seen any of his friends. Since then, he had been a prisoner of his family.

Jim was brought back to the present day by a truck engine, a diesel roar in the distance. He heard the noise change pitch and fade away. He realized that must be nearly at the campground already. Shit, he'd come that far? He turned around and looked up the slope, sighing at the idea of the hike ahead of him. But he had no choice.

That's what he hated most, feeling like he had no choice in anything. How far away his eighteenth birthday seemed, when he'd have lots of choices. Being an adult meant you never had to do anything you didn't want to do. Jim couldn't wait.

He looked down at his wrist. The shaman's braided bracelet was still there. He peeled it off and put it in his pocket. He could be free of that one thing, for a while. One reluctant step at a time, Jim trudged back up the slope of Mt. Hood.

The Mountain, late morning.

Deep inside the central vent, the magma moved. A plug filled the vent, but it was starting to give at the edges after hours of pressure. Hundreds of tons of upward pressure made hairline fractures appear in the old rock. Infinitesimally, the cracks widened. Not enough yet.

But soon.

Camas, Washington. Morning, June 14.

Chad and Francie weren't yet to their assigned streets when they stopped to help a family trudging out of the mud. A mother held a screaming toddler, and a six- or seven-year-old boy was coated up to his waist, struggling alongside his mother through the last of the mud, looking miserable. Chad waded out and picked up the boy and carried him out to clear pavement, to the exhausted thanks of the mother.

"Is anyone hurt?" asked Francie, who held the large first aid kit she had taken along. First aid, evacuation, light search and rescue: that was their mission.

The civilians all shook their heads and Chad and Francie moved on. When they had passed beyond the hearing of the muddy family, Chad said to Francie, "Everyone looks like some horror movie character, Invasion of the Clay Man, or something."

The level of the mud in the streets wasn't falling fast, and neither of them could figure out why. The lahar had washed in and stopped, so why wasn't it washing back out? There was, in effect, a new murky pond covering the low areas of town. When he first stepped into it, he was shocked at how cold it was. It smelled like dirt, like the worst case of mold ever, and it carried a faint chemical smell, too. Chad hoped that whatever chemical that was wouldn't give him cancer ten years down the road. All sorts of rubbish stuck out of the mud, splintered limbs, cars that had been shifted several feet before being set back down any which way on the street, bits of lumber, dead animals, and one boulder the size of a SUV.

They encountered a stunned older couple who had some minor cuts, and Francie treated them the best she could, washing out the cuts with the two of the four bottles of drinking water they had brought, then using antiseptic wipes, then plastering gauze over all, telling the people to do it again once they had access to water or got to a first aid station. They moved on up the hill.

The radio crackled twice with a general announcement. First, the location of the new triage/first aid center, which Chad committed to memory. The second time, the radio reported that drinking water may have been compromised. Do not drink from the tap.

"Great," said Francie. "Water is going to be a problem."

"Yeah, you used half of what we had on that couple."

"And didn't get the injuries near clean enough. Nobody here has ever dealt with this before. We didn't know. It's not just us with a problem. Everybody from the station is out on the streets without

enough water."

When they got to their assigned section of town, Chad insisted on taking the first aid kit from Francie. "I'm taller," he said. "And I might need to hold it open while you get something from it. You keep the radio."

Francie agreed, and they waded in deeper and began to quarter their streets, looking for people who needed help. A few people came up to them, a few more yelled questions out of windows, and some seemed to take comfort from their presence on the street. They told everyone not to drink from the tap.

But this was nothing like Chad had imagined firefighting to be. He had imagined fires, of course, not floods, but even in rescue work, his mental image had been of a frenetic television-show pace. This was slow, careful, as routine as putting cans on the Safeway shelf. Slap on a Band-aid, move on, talk, move on.

Just before 11:00, at a wide intersection where the street toward the river dropped off, they saw their first dead person.

Francie spotted it first and waded further into the muck.

"Francie, wait," Chad called, as she passed beyond the knee-depth limit they'd been told. Wasn't she supposed to be supervising him, making sure he didn't mess up? Not the other way around. When she turned, he saw that she was carrying a small human form, a kid, struggling to lift it free of the sucking mud. He went to help her. As he got deeper into it, the mud dragged at his legs. Francie must find moving even harder because the mud hit her above the knees. Chad took the child from her--heavier than expected because of the mud--and to a raised cedar deck attached to a house. He eased the child down, cradling the head until it came to rest on the deck.

Francie knelt beside him. She scraped mud off the still, small face. As she did, the features of the child came clearer, maybe nine years old, maybe a girl. The mud made it impossible to tell for sure. Francie cupped her fingers and scooped a handful of mud out of the child's mouth. "Jesus," she whispered. She pressed her head down on the small muddy chest, listening. She dug more mud out of the child's mouth. "I'll need more water." She glanced around. "Find a bucket or something. Get water from one of these spigots."

Tearing his gaze away from the small body, Chad forced his legs to move. He ran up the walkway to the house, splashing mud, and pounded on the door. No one answered. He slipped around the house and saw a shed, small, weathered, wooden, in need of a coat of paint. He sprinted to it and yanked on the door. Chad was willing to bust down the door if he needed to, but when he turned the handle, the door of the shed opened. He spotted a battered metal watering can, grabbed it up, and took it to an outdoor water spigot that barely

cleared the level of the mud. The water came out clear. He wondered if it would stay that way, and for how long. The water treatment plant was on low ground, and maybe that was why the radio had said the water was bad. Chad shook his head. The extent of the disaster was coming home to him in stages. What he was doing felt slow and plodding, but he really was in the midst of a bona fide disaster, here. This wasn't TV. It was real. He realized he was trying not let his mind rest on the image of the muddy kid lying, so still, up on the deck.

He rushed the filled can back to Francie who was sitting back on her heels, pulling off her purple medical gloves. "It's no use. She's gone," she said, "But thanks." Her face was bleak. She yanked on fresh medical gloves, pulled work gloves over them, then touched the child's arm where she'd tied a black plastic strip that meant she was dead. "Let's go," she said.

"Should we leave her here?" Chad asked, looking at a couple walking past, holding matching suitcases on their heads. They didn't seem to notice the dead girl. The little body lay in his peripheral vision. He didn't want to look right at her. He didn't know her, but she was someone's little girl. Whoever it was would be devastated by it. If they weren't dead themselves. What if she was local, and they just happened by and saw her lying here?

Francie said, "I wish we had a blue tarp to cover her with. But we're not doing recovery. We should focus on saving who we can. I've radioed in the location of the body. I'm sorry to leave her, but we don't have the time to deal with the dead yet, not if there's anyone we can help."

Chad knew she was right. They walked away from the dead child.

Chad carried both the full watering can--he'd get it back to the owners later if he could--and the first aid kit. They moved down a new street and turned away from the river. When they were far enough north to see where the mud stopped a few blocks up, a motion in the mud nearby caught Chad's eye. His heart leapt. "There's something moving." He strode over toward it, having to get right up to it before he could see it was a dog. A very wet, unhappy-looking small dog, paddling furiously to keep his head above the flood.

Chad set down the watering can and grabbed for its collar. Missing, he took another step and grabbed for it again. This time he snagged the collar, pulled it over, and the dog tried to climb up his arm before he could get a grip on in. "It's okay fella," he said soothingly, which calmed the dog not at all. The claws scrabbled for purchase, and Chad felt one clip his arm and tear the skin. A chunk of cedar or redwood fencing was floating a few steps away. He made for it and, holding the dog by its ruff, put it and the first aid kit down onto the fence. The fence wobbled under the weight. Chad grabbed at

the edge to stabilize it.

Bent over, pushing at the edge of the fencing, Chad steered the dog over to the edge of the lahar. "You can go now, boy," he said, but the dog looked miserably at him. Chad pushed the fence all the way onto the pavement until he felt it scraping on concrete. When he couldn't push it any further, he left the dog sitting there. The dog would figure out it was safe to move eventually. Chad gathered the gear up and waded back in to join Francie.

He was almost to her when she slipped on something and went down. Her head disappeared under the gray flood.

The mud fought him every step. Something tangled in his ankles and he kicked it away. Francie's head broke the surface. It seemed like forever since he had seen her but it could have only been a few seconds. She spat, shook her head, spat again.

"Chad?" she called. "I can't see."

"I'm here," he said. He heaved the first aid kit and watering can into the bed of a pickup truck. Next to Francie floated the carcass of a cow, half submerged. "Hang on to me. I'll get us back to solid ground." He waded back to the truck and picked up the watering can. "Shower of water coming," he said, and he poured it over her head. It did little good. "Don't open your eyes yet," he said. "I'll guide you to water." He got her down on the ground by the closest outdoor spigot and turned it on. She thrust her head under it, then her hands, her head again, and finally opened her eyes, blinking them clear. "Thanks," she said.

"Just get yourself clean."

"Water pressure's low. I hope we aren't losing it entirely," she said, ducking her head under then spitting. "Sorry. Boy, if there's a fire...." She shook her head. "Bad news."

"That was in that disaster report I read at the firehouse. About earthquakes, though, losing water mains while gas lines exploded and set fires."

"At least we don't have broken gas lines." She spat again. "I gotta wash my mouth out."

"But the water," Chad said. "They said it's not good."

"The mud is inside every orifice already. Whatever bacteria or chemicals are in there must be worse than what's in the tap water. But I promise I won't swallow," she said. She rinsed her mouth and spat it out repeatedly. "Here, you clean up some, too." She ceded her spot at the spigot to him.

Chad's hands were coated, his chest had been muddy since he had carried that first kid out, his right cheek felt like it had mud drying on it, and his white work shirt would never be white again. He cleaned the worst of the mud off, and he took his vest off and rinsed it so that "Fire" was visible again.

"Good idea," said Francie, and she did the same.

Now she looked like horror movie Clay Person with a bright yellow vest on. He imagined he did, too.

"Did that cow carcass get you?" he asked, rolling up his wet sleeves

"No. I slipped, like an idiot. Stepped on something, maybe only the edge of a curb, and couldn't catch myself."

"You hurt?"

"No, but looks like you are," she said, pointing. "Your arm."

"What?" he looked down. A streak of red was visible through the light coating of diluted mud.

"Dog, I think," he said. "His claw must have got me."

"Rinse it really well. Then let's put antibiotic cream and a bandage on it."

"For all the good it'll do." He imagined the bandage falling off the first time he put his arm back into the mud.

"It'll do some good," she said, looking around. "Where's the first aid kit?"

He pointed to where he'd left it.

"I'll get it." She stood up. "I'm getting tired of plowing through that mud. How 'bout you?"

"Thirsty, mostly." The morning was getting on, and it was a warm sunny day.

"We should have taken more water with us," she said.

"We can knock on doors, ask for some."

"No. I hate to take their only drinking water. They'll need it too. Safe water is going to be the worst problem in all this, I bet you dollars to donuts."

Chad looked around at the altered landscape of the town. "You know, we're only four blocks from the Safeway. If there's anyone there, we can get drinking water off the shelf."

"We'll head that way. But first, let's fix your arm."

After she had, they made their way along, their feet making faint slurping sounds as they dipped in and out of the mud. Chad felt his bad Achilles twinge.

I'm going to hurt so much tomorrow he thought, then felt ashamed for whining, even silently to himself. Imagine what the parents of the little girl whose body they left on the porch would feel. Soreness was nothing compared to that.

They found one elderly, querulous man sitting on his front porch a half-block later and had to spend fifteen minutes calming him. They pointed out the mud level was dropping and that by the next morning, he'd likely be able to leave the neighborhood if he wished. The phone lines, the landlines, were out now too, and the old man didn't have a cell phone. "It must be hard," Chad said after they left, "sitting there

alone with nothing to do but worry."

They made it to the Safeway at twenty before noon. It was closed, locked, and the lights were off. Chad led her around back to the service entrance and pounded on the door. "It's Chad Keppler," he shouted, pounding again. He waited a minute and repeated his pounding, starting to think that no one was inside.

He was relieved when the door opened, Mr. Fonville standing there looking dazed. "You're back," he said.

"We're working the streets, rescuing people," he said, though they had rescued none so far. They had only comforted and explained. "We need water. A quick bite to eat, maybe." He gestured towards Francie. "This is Francine Quill, one of the city's firefighters. Mr. Fonville, general manager of the Safeway."

Fonville offered his hand but Francie smiled ruefully. "I'm too muddy. And we don't know what contaminants are in the mud, so maybe a handshake isn't a good idea."

Fonville blinked and snatched his hand back. "Oh! Well. Of course, come in."

"You've closed the store?" she said, following him inside.

"Got all the customers out, like Chad said to."

Francie gave Chad a nod of approval. To Fonville, she said, "Good." She pulled off her boots, and Chad kicked off his sneakers. Chad put down the first aid kit, and Francie picked it right back up, carrying it along as she trailed Fonville into the store.

He said, "There are three employees still here." He let the outer door close and the room turned dark. "We've lost electricity," he said, turning on a flashlight.

While they walked back through the storeroom, Francie gave the well-rehearsed spiel about tap water. "The mud level is coming down, but it's getting more treacherous to walk over. It's slippery stuff. So you may want to stay here until it dries entirely."

"How long will that be?"

"I really don't know," she said. "I've never seen a lahar before. If the weather stays clear and hot, it could be a day. Or more."

"I can't stay overnight," he said, sounding appalled at the idea.

"Then be very, very careful with your footing if you do walk out," she said. "Go in a group, just in case, and go before nightfall. There's all sorts of debris under the surface. I've fallen myself, and I don't want you to hurt yourself. If you get cut, go home and disinfect it well. She turned her head, studying the full shelves in the aisle they were entering. "I need to radio in and ask about all this food," she muttered.

"What?" said Fonville.

"And the bottled water," Chad said, reading her meaning. Most

people had food for a few days at home. But what about water? The bridges were out, and Chad had no idea about the status of the big bridges over at Portland. It could be Washington and Oregon were totally cut off from each other. The store must have hundreds of gallons of water of various brands, fruit juice and soda, enough for many, many people. Would it be commandeered, or bought? Would the distribution be regulated? Chad had no idea. This was one of the thousand details those emergency plans hadn't given.

Somebody far up the command chain would know the right thing to do. Or he hoped they would know. They must have a thousand other things to think of at the same time. He was happy to be a soldier, not a general, at a time like this.

Francie didn't talk about any of that to Fonville, but she must have been thinking about it too. She said, "I appreciate getting some water and a bite. We've been working hard just to get through the mud."

Fonville glanced at Chad. "He's a good worker."

"He is that," Francie said.

Chad felt a wash of embarrassment heat his cheeks.

She said, "Mr. Fonville, could we replenish our first aid kit?"

"We don't have electricity," he said, "so we can't use the checkout."

"Keep track and bill the fire department, then," she said.

"No, no, Of course, just take whatever you need," he said. "I don't know what I was thinking. The morning has been so...." He waved his hands in the air as if searching for the right word, but he couldn't find it and shrugged.

After taking more antibiotic cream, saline in squirt bottles from the contact lens supply area, and the largest bandages the store carried, Francie and Chad grabbed wrapped deli sandwiches, Cokes, and an eight-pack of bottled water, each of them downing a bottle immediately. They put the rest of the water bottles into the large vest pockets and sat in the coffee shop to eat their sandwiches. When they were done, they headed back to their assigned streets.

"It's more public relations than rescue," he said, after answering another person's questions.

"Sometimes it is. Sometimes it's social work, or just being a decent human being. Most times the job is heart attacks and strokes, you know that. Big fires are pretty rare for a firefighter," she said.

He nodded. It had been in front of him all along, but he was seeing the job anew today. This was a major disaster, and he was a working rescuer, but it had been mostly trudging through mud and very little excitement, Band-Aids and reassuring words. Hadn't he once heard that about being in a war? 99% boredom and 1% terror. That made sense to him now.

Francie pointed down the street to a lump the retreating mud had

left in the street ahead. "And then there's recovery," she said. "That's another body, I think."

They made their way over, and it was a body, an adult human battered nearly beyond recognition. Broken limbs and neck, the head twisted around almost backwards, one jagged leg bone sticking out through jeans, gray with mud but still recognizable as human bone. Chad felt sick at the sight. There was no doubt this one was dead. Francie stooped over it to tie on a black tag. "You know, this guy might have come from way up river. It could be someone from Troutdale or Gresham or farther up still."

Chad tried to imagine bouncing all the way down ten or twenty miles in the lahar, only to be cast up in downtown Camas looking like this. Of course, you'd have been dead for the whole ride, but it still seemed like such an abuse of your humanity. You wouldn't want this end for yourself. He shook his head. "I don't think I like recovery."

"Nobody does. You make sure you talk to our psychologist after all this." She stood, turned, and looked him in the eye.

"But I'm not a firefighter or on your medical plan or anything," he said.

"I don't care. I'll tell Rausch to make sure you get to use her. And you can call me, even at night, if you wake up and need to talk. You're at risk of PTSD, same as us all."

"I am?" He thought of that as a wartime thing, guys who freaked out at the sound of helicopters. He couldn't imagine being wrecked for life by this one day of work. Yeah, it was awful seeing bodies, and that little girl might haunt his daydreams for a while. Or the mud-covered bone on this person, jutting out like that, the weirdly twisted head. Okay, yeah. He could believe he might have nightmares, especially once he didn't have a task to focus on.

She patted his arm. "Don't worry about it now, but--"

Thud.

An explosion. Somewhere distant, he couldn't tell where. He felt it through his feet and legs as well as heard it. An oil tanker somewhere? Or maybe a propane tank at the edge of town? Oh boy, they had low water pressure. If a big fire got going, that would be the worst. And could the fire engines trying to rush to put out a fire get stuck in the mud?

Then, *BOOM*.

The second explosion rocked him. He flinched from the noise, the loudest noise he'd ever heard or ever hoped to hear in his life. He pressed his hand to his right ear, which ached. A wave of nausea swept through him. Even his knees felt nauseated. Crazy. He pulled his hand away from his ear and looked at his hand, expecting to see blood. There was none.

His head rung like a struck gong. His right ear was buzzing, like right after a loud concert where he'd been pressed up against the amplifier stacks. "What--" he started to say, and he realized he couldn't hear very well either. He forgot what he was going to ask and touched his ear again.

Then he saw that Francie was staring up and over his shoulder, her face pale, her mouth open in shock.

He turned. In the southwest sky was the familiar white of Mt. Hood's glaciers. But from its tip--his mind registered that the shape was all wrong--there rose a black cloud of...of.... His mind was stuttering with naming it.

"Erupting," Francie said. "The volcano is erupting."

Below McNeil Point, 11:55 a.m.

Ellen and Ty had taken their time leaving the campsite that morning. He had treated some glacial melt water first thing and refilled all their water bottles, in case, he said, they decided to take a detour on their hike back down to the car. Up there in the clearing the world was beautiful under a clear sky. Amazing wildflowers, white avalanche lilies, purple heather, red Indian paintbrush, lavender shooting stars that opened up as the sunshine touched them. Ty knew all their names.

When she had her fill of the view, they had gotten their gear organized and had begun the hike down. After an hour, they made it to the turnoff he had taken to the lava tube cave yesterday.

Only yesterday? She felt as if they had known each other for weeks, not only a few days. She couldn't remember the last time the first three dates with a man had been anywhere near this much fun.

He stopped and pointed out some sickly trees. "Invasion of some sort of Asian beetle causing that damage."

She got her water bottle out and drank. "Is it serious?"

"They don't know yet. It's the container ships from Asia. They carry creatures and seeds on them, in them, and they get into the North American ecosystem and wreak havoc." He stretched, and she admired the shape of his lithe arms. "It's already so warm today. The clouds cleared up, and bam, it's summer. Overnight, literally." He smiled at her. "Hungry yet? I have an apple and some cashews."

A tremendous bang shocked them both. Then a second explosion came, and with it, the earth beneath her rocked. She stumbled and flailed to keep her balance. He grabbed her arm and steadied her.

The noise had been so loud her ears hurt. No, her whole head hurt, her jaw, too. "Hello?" she said, testing. She could hear herself, but the sound was fainter than normal.

Ty was looking into the sky. "Run," he said, yanking her by the arm and taking off down the narrow side trail.

"What?" He let go and she stumbled along behind him.

"Run harder!" he yelled and dropped her arm, sprinting down the trail.

She ran after him, confused, but with no doubt that he was seriously afraid.

He glanced back at her and forward again, sprinting harder. She forced her legs to move and tried to close the growing distance between them. Branches slapped at her as she ran.

In less than two minutes they had made it down the trail to the lava tube. Ellen glanced up and saw a tower of black ash, a cloud looming above them. She stopped and gaped.

"Get in there now! Now!" Ty stood at the entrance to the lava tube. She realized it wasn't ringing in her ears that she heard now, it was that thing, that black tower of ash, making a sound like a jet engine trying for take-off. She ran over to him and he shoved her through the narrow cave opening. He pushed in behind her, slamming into her body.

"Go. Go," he yelled.

She stumbled down the slope of the lava tube toward the dark rubble at the end, his hand touching her back, falling away, regaining contact again.

"All the way back!" he said. "Faster!"

Stumbling on the uneven floor, she ran down the slope, away from the entrance, trying not to trip on the rough surface.

Then the whole world went black. She tripped over a bump and fell to hands and knees. Ty crashed into her and went down on top of her. He pushed her down flatter and covered her body with his.

The sound of a freight train. Two freight trains. No, a hundred freight trains, right over their heads, roaring, roaring, making her stupid with the noise. Her mind flashed on the column of rising ash and red lightning--red lightning?--she had just seen outside and, bizarrely, flashed back to her job and those book-banning crazies, their vision of their Hell, and she thought, that was it. I actually saw their Hell. That's what they think will happen to ten year olds who read Harry Potter. What kind of hateful madman would come up with that? Her mind snapped back to the present, to the weight of Ty over her, his mouth at her ear. If he was saying something, his words were lost in the hundred-freight-train roar. She wanted to cover her ears, but her arms were trapped.

The noise went on and on. She understood that this was a volcano going off, but she didn't understand the sound. Everything around her vibrated. Her eyes were open but she could see nothing in the darkness. Her teeth rattled against the rock and it hurt her skull.

Finally, the noise lessened. She wondered how long it had actually been. A minute? Seemed like much more.

A dim light returned to the cave. She wriggled and Ty rolled off her.

She lifted herself on her elbows and turned her head to ask, "What was that?"

"Pyroclastic flow," he said. "The column of ash collapses during a fluctuation, and it flows down the mountainside."

She had read about that somewhere--curse of the librarian again,

she thought, a little knowledge about everything.

"It's like a hurricane, with rocks, but faster," he said. "And maybe a thousand degrees, or even two thousand."

"Oh," she said.

"We would have been incinerated. Or people have their blood come to an immediate boil and their skin splits and their skulls rupture--"

"Stop," she said. "Too much info." She collapsed onto one arm, lying on her side, facing him. "You saved me."

"You saved yourself by trusting me and running." He sat up and shook his head. "No one outruns a pyroclastic flow."

"But we just did." She sat up, too, rubbing life back into her arms.

"Had we still been up at McNeil point, we'd be dead. Or down at the car. Dead. This was dumb luck."

"It was dumb luck being where we were, but it was you thinking fast that got us inside the cave."

The light was continuing to brighten. She looked back at the entrance and saw a yellow-gray glow. "Is it gone?"

"This one is."

"This one? I wish you hadn't said that."

"Depends, I guess, on the eruption if there'll be another."

"So, we could still die."

"We're going to die one day, for sure," he said, reaching out to push a strand of hair off her cheek. "Eventually. But we'll try not to make it today."

"I wish we had made love last night," she blurted, embarrassed as soon as the words were out of her mouth. But he grinned at her, and she felt better. Emboldened. If this were the last ten minutes of her life.... "You aren't in the mood right now, are you?"

He looked down at his crotch and shook his head, ruefully. "I don't think I could."

She patted his knee. "Oh, that's okay, honey. That happens to every man once in his life after a volcanic eruption."

He laughed. "You know something? I really like you." And he pulled her into a kiss.

Her first thought--this is a crazy time to be doing this--was overridden by a rush of desire. Zero to sixty in a second. She pulled him in and kissed back with a desperate passion. She wanted him, wanted him naked. Wanted him without the condom she had tucked in her backpack. She pushed up against him, trying to shrug off her pack. Wanted him inside her, wanted him *now*. Wanted to be pregnant by him. Shocked, she pulled back. Pregnant? What the hell was that all about?

He looked quizzically at her.

And then she understood. "It's life," she said, in wonder. "It's life, just trying to stay alive."

"We'll stay alive," he said.

Of course he didn't know what she had been thinking. And she was glad he didn't, embarrassed now by that longing, wowed still by its force, though she believed she understood what created it. Her biological clock had come to life all at once, for she had never been fixated on having children immediately, having plenty of surrogate ones at work. But now its alarm was shrilling at her, insistent. She felt her empty womb as a painful void, a literal, physical ache. It was astonishing, new, something strangely marvelous in the midst of danger.

Enough time later to think of that. Enough time later--she hoped--to follow up on that kiss. She said, "What do we need to do now?"

"No idea. Let's figure it out together." He stood and led her toward the front of the cave.

She could hear a ticking sound. Little pops and cracks, like static or--no, like hail. Outside, the world was sepia toned, a photograph from 1910. A shower of ash, a sort of yellowish gray, fell exactly like snow, like the tail end of a Great Plains blizzard. A bigger rock streaked through this and fell, bouncing and rolling to the cave entrance. She reached out.

He touched her arm. "Don't. 'It'll be hot."

Cautiously she moved her hand toward it, and she did feel heat radiating from the rock. Wild. "In other words, we can't go out."

"Not right now," he agreed.

"When?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Ellen. I just don't know."

"At least we ate well yesterday," she said. "And thank you for filling the water bottles."

"I could tell you thought I was being a little bit obsessive."

"I'll never doubt you again. Ever."

He gave her a wry smile. "Don't promise that. Doubt me when I'm an idiot."

"Noted," she said. She looked back outside at the ashfall. "I want to do something."

"We could play twenty questions," he said. "Or make out some more."

"Now I don't know if *I* can," she said. "I feel queasy. What's that smell out there? It's nauseating."

"Sulfur. Magma is full of sulfur. It boils out during an eruption. That's the yellow color, too. Now, it's interesting why it's yellow."

"You could lecture me on the properties of various chemicals, I guess," she said. "That'd be different."

"Or we could just sit and talk," he said with a smile, pointing back into the cave. "The smell will be weaker back there."

They went down the slope again and sat. Ellen needed something useful to do, so she inventoried their food and water. They had nearly a gallon of water between them. Dried apricots, a fresh apple, nuts, and two more granola bars. Enough for a day. A second day stuck in here? They'd be hungry and thirsty.

"So the volcano has to quiet back down. And soon," she said.

"Or a strong wind could come up," he said. "Blow it all away from us."

They sat side by side, watching the entrance, and talked.

"Did you ever think about how you might die?" she asked him.

"Hoping it would be quick and painless," he said. "Like most people. And a long way off in the future."

"I always wanted to die at sea and have my body tossed overboard for the fishes. It seems so ecologically sound."

"Take many cruises?"

"Never." She laughed. "No idea how to sail, even."

"Ever wanted to learn? Do you have one of those before-I-die lists, and is there a lot left on it?"

"I want..." She had to think. "Honestly, I don't care about sailing. I don't want to keep my job, I know that much now. I want a different career, or, no, I love books. I want to live in some more liberal place where I don't have the problems I have back home, maybe work with older kids or in an alternative school. And I want to retire early if I can. And still help humanity somehow. Normal, stuff, isn't it? Or trite, even."

"It's nice," he said.

"How 'bout you? You have a list?"

"I used to want to discover a comet when I was a kid. You get your name on them. Then when you die, your name lives on."

"Why haven't you?"

"It's not that easy. And these days, it's all done with big sky surveys and computers that compare images over time. Only a few guys, mostly in Japan for some reason, find them the old fashioned way, scanning with binoculars. But mostly, I moved to Portland, and there are clouds 200 nights a year and light pollution the rest. You need clear, dark skies. It's not that important, anyway. It was a childhood dream."

"Any dreams from adulthood?"

"I'd like to travel, weird places, mostly. Like, I'd like to visit Los Alamos, and the Trinity site, where they set off the first bomb--it's still a secure site, only open to civilians once a year, and you need reservations. I've never gone. And I'd like to go to the museum in

Nagasaki. The bomb's a horrible thing, but it was sort of a wonderful thing, too, physicists' moment in the sun. Remaking the sun, in fact, in a time where the greatest minds got together and took this amazing leap forward."

"You make it sound amazing."

"I'm a nerd on the topic," he said. "I've read every book, every novel on Los Alamos, popular works and academic ones. Poems, even. I don't know entirely why I'm so fixated. The beauty of the innovative thinking and the evil of human warfare, I guess, such strange bedfellows. How they thought the first test might unwind all of the matter in the universe but they went ahead with it anyway. Oppenheimer coming to his senses too late, and 'I am death, the destroyer of worlds.' It's a grand tragedy."

"Is the bomb more powerful than the volcano?"

"What a good question--you must have been a wonderful student. But not even close. Mother Nature has much more power."

"You said you were raised an atheist. So you think if we die today, there isn't anything after?"

He took her hand and squeezed it. "We're not going to die today. But no, there's nothing after for me. All the more reason to fight to live, as long and as well as we can." His fingers stroked hers. "You think there's something after?"

"I have no idea. I like some of the ideas I've read, like reincarnation. That'd be fun, especially if I could fly in my new life. And there's something satisfying in the belief that assholes will be punished and the virtuous rewarded, isn't there? Doesn't happen in this realm often enough. So I could come back, fly, *and* crap on their heads."

He laughed. "So you don't think we're being punished for something now, I take it?" His tone was teasing.

"For being too lazy to get going earlier this morning, maybe. Nothing more mystical-universal-karmic than that."

He dropped her hand. "Hang on." He walked to the front of the cave again and looked out. He thrust his hand out and drew it back. He came back to her and said. "Not yet, but it's getting better. Another hour, and if we wrap our faces up, I think we could risk walking down. If we can get down."

"Why mightn't we?"

"It's a mess out there. Trees are down. We won't be able to drive, if the car is drivable, which it won't be if it was in the way, too. We'll have to walk down, climbing over downed trees--probably it would be smarter to walk over, to get out of the destruction, and then down."

"Maybe we should stay here overnight."

"I'd rather not risk a second eruption. Or a flank eruption on this

side. Magma could come blasting through right there." He pointed at the end of the cave.

Ellen gaped. "Seriously?"

"Not there in particular. But anywhere. We need to get off the mountain if we can, and the sooner, the better." A few minutes later, he said, "Let's look outside again."

Outside, the snowflake-like ash--ashflakes--were smaller, falling less densely. No more chunks of rock came speeding down as she watched. In a crazy way, the ash could have been restful to watch, like a light snowstorm, if she were inside and looking through a window. "Ugh, the smell," she said, and backed away. If she had to walk through that smell, she'd be puking in no time.

They went back in and sat once more, sharing a drink of water, saying a few words, but mostly waiting in increasing tension. In another few minutes, he said, "Let's look again." He uncrossed his legs, stood. And fell to his knees with a moan.

1:15. Below McNeil Point, eastern flank of Mount Hood.

Ty swayed on his knees. He fell forward onto his palms.

Ellen was at his side in a flash. "Ty? What's wrong?"

"Can't," he said. He shook his head as if trying to clear it. "Must be gas. Get out."

Huh? Ellen realized her brain wasn't working any too well either. Gas. The sulfur smell. Were they being asphyxiated down here? She held her breath, got up, and pulled at Ty, trying to get him to his feet.

He outweighed her by a good thirty or forty pounds. She couldn't carry him. She let go, his eyes closed and he hit the floor, unconscious. She slapped him and he didn't react at all.

What should she do? She sprinted toward the opening of the cave. She stopped there, taking long deep breaths. She was sure she could feel her head starting to clear. Relatively sure. She was so frightened, it was hard to assess her own mental state. It wasn't going to be good breathing out there, not with all the ash floating around. But here at the entrance, whatever was making her woozy farther back seemed to be absent.

She looked back at Ty, still unmoving, down the slope of the cave. If a dangerous gas was flowing down that slope, it could be collecting down there. So it'd be better air up here, right? Wasn't that possible? Yes. As her head cleared more, she was sure of it. So she had to get him up here. She took a last deep breath and ran back down the cave's slope. No way she could hold her breath the whole way back up, too. Shit. She had to breathe normally. And somehow manage to not pass out.

Pack off the shoulders. Grab your bag. Unroll it next to Ty. Roll him over. Get his pack off. That took a few seconds to fight it off his limp body, and the whole time she was trying to take shallow breaths. As if that would help. She should have listened to any chemistry lecture he had offered her. Maybe she'd know better what to do. *There.* Pack finally off. Roll him onto the bag. She squatted down with her back to the cave entrance, took the bag in one hand, Ty's shirt collar and the bag in the other and pulled. *Pulled.* Finally, his body moved. Another step. Another step. There was no choice about controlling her breathing now; she had to breathe hard with the effort. Another step.

Slowly, she dragged him twenty feet, then thirty feet up the slope. Her head started feeling odd again, her thoughts slowing and twisting in circles. She hated to, but she dropped the bag to jog back to the entrance and get better air. A minute passed that she resented

spending just breathing. Her head cleared. Then back down to Ty, get him centered on the bag again, and more pulling, and more. He was dead weight, conked out totally. How long did it take for someone to get brain damaged? How long had it taken her to get him this far? She had to hurry. Ty lay there, helpless, and she had to move him. Pull. Pull. Focus only on that.

Finally, she had him at the entrance and dropped to her knees beside him. She shook him. "Ty?"

Damn it. She slapped him, really hard. "Wake up!" she shouted.

He groaned. Relief washed over her. Not dead, at least.

She swept a leg across his torso and put both palms down to push on his belly, trying to force his lungs clear of whatever was in there. In with the good air, out with the bad. A distant memory of that phrase. Some cartoon? Old movie? Goofy thing to think of right now. Maybe her mind wasn't all that clear, after all.

His eyes popped open. "Wha--?" he said.

She sagged with relief. "You passed out. Is it some sulfur gas, Ty?"

"Doubt it. SO₂ rises," he said.

That was good news--not what he said about the gas, but that his brain was able to toss up chemical formulas and properties. No brain damage, she thought. Hoped.

"Why did you faint then, lower down?"

"CO₂," he moaned. "Or something worse. Aww, shit." He blinked. "My head hurts."

"Did you hit it?" she asked, worried. A concussion? How would they hike out if he had a concussion?

"No," he said. "Hurts inside. Sharp headache." He rubbed his temples with a knuckle. "I think it's fading a little."

"If there's gas trapped in this cave, we need to get out of here."

"Yeah." He pushed himself up to a sitting position. "It's probably filling up with CO₂. From the bottom up. Even if we wanted to stay in here, we couldn't for long."

She felt better at hearing those complete sentences. "I was so worried," she said, feeling belatedly shaky.

"You did great. You got me up here, didn't you? Saved me."

"You saved us getting us in here before we got fried and our heads exploded. So if you need to keep score, we're even," she said, more sharply than she intended. Worry was getting to her, making her edgy. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap. It's just, I don't see how we can stay. And I don't see how we can leave."

"Help me stand up," he said, offering her his hands. With her help, he stood. "Better." He ducked his head to look outside. "I think we can leave. It's a thinner ashfall all the time." He looked back at her with a worried look and said. "We need the packs, though. We need the

water."

"You stay in the good air. I can get them in a flash." Before he could stop her, she took a deep breath, sprinted down the length of the cave, grabbed a pack strap in each hand and hurried back. His pack, with the tent attached, was heavy. Her held breath lasted half way up the slope. Good enough, for she didn't get dizzy again before she reached him.

"We need something to cover our mouths and noses," he said. "And eye protection."

Ellen always kept a red bandana in the outer compartment of her backpack. She unzipped the compartment, pulled it out and tied it around her face, stagecoach-robber style.

Ty dug a pair of lightly-tinted goggles from his backpack. "Still in here from the last cross-country ski trip. Damned good thing they are. You use those."

"What about your eyes?"

"I'll squint. My hat will do good enough to keep most of the ash out of them," he said.

"I should have worn a hat."

He shook his head. "Doesn't matter. We're good." He had his T-shirt from yesterday in his hand, and he tied it around his face. It looked like something from TV news footage, like people disguising themselves to loot an electronics store. Or fleeing from poison gas. As indeed they were. He put on his hat. "Let's go."

"Where? Down the mountain?"

"Get your pack on, and we'll figure it out."

She put that and the goggles on and the world went a little darker. Like it wasn't dark enough already. They stepped from the cave mouth and into what should have been, on any normal day, fresh air. Today, it was a weirdly altered landscape. Downhill, trees were flat on the ground. Not just a few. All of them lay like matchsticks, lying west to east, neatly piled, like a giant had dropped a box of straws on the mountainside.

Several trees were smoldering, tiny fingers of smoke rising from denuded branches and joining with the airborne ash. The sky wasn't visible as anything more than a vague sense of backlighting.

"Maybe we should go up," he said, turning around and looking to the east. "Get above the tree line."

"Closer to the volcano?" She listened for its roar, that jet engine sound. She could hear it, but faintly. She realized they couldn't get closer to the volcano. They were *on* the volcano. "Closer to the eruption, I mean."

Ty was thinking, she could see, calculating, looking upslope and then down. He shook his head, decisive. "Nope. Getting down to the

road is going to be impossible. The trail will be gone, and the route is full of downed trees."

"But your car."

"The car is gone. It's dead. It is no more," he said. "And even if it were a tank, it still couldn't get down the road. Imagine all the trees, downed like this, for several miles of road."

"So we can't stay here," she said, but now she wished they could. The lava tube now seemed the coziest of homes. Damn that gas.

"I think our only chance is to get above the tree line to a clearing and wait for rescue. We need to be visible," he said. "Maybe we can get to McNeil point and stake down the tent. It's brightly colored. As soon as they can, they'll get helicopters up here looking for survivors. They'll see the tent from the air."

"You sure about that? That they'll send out rescue?"

"Yes. Or news helicopters will come looking for a scoop even earlier. Us surviving, that'll be big news. They'd love to rescue you, get the exclusive. Then you can get rich if you want, selling your story to those slimy news programs. Survivor stories."

"I'd rather stay poor and be in a hotel room taking a shower," she said. "About a hundred miles from here."

"Smart woman."

"So if we have to go towards danger, let's get going."

"We should be fine. If it keeps venting from where it is, up top, doesn't suddenly get bigger and spill more pyroclasts down at us, we might make it."

"Might?"

"Best I can give you, I'm afraid. Best I can give myself." He took her hand. "Let's give it our finest shot. C'mon."

They made their way toward where the trail used to be, steadying each other as they clambered over downed trees, making slow, slow progress. The ash had fallen on the tree trunks and turned them slippery, like it was sleet falling and not tiny bits of rock. Every step onto a log was a disaster--a mini disaster among the vast unthinkable disaster. Her thighs ached as she took a giant step over a tree, rested for a heartbeat as she straddled it, dragged her back leg forward, and did it again immediately. Through her jeans she could feel heat from the downed trunks.

This was insane, she thought, over and over. Going back to the cave, crawling in, and letting the mystery gas take her consciousness and then her life: she wondered if that might not be the better death. Or would being burned alive be better? It would hurt, but not for long. Two hours ago, her choices in life had been so simple: move on from the Portland area, or hang around with Ty another few days? Get naked with Ty, not get naked with Ty? She looked back on the

moments before the eruption with nostalgia, as if she were ninety years old and thinking about her carefree youth far, far away.

On and on they went, struggling uphill. Every five or ten minutes, their masks filled with ash. They had to take them off and shake them out. Then they replaced the masks and could breathe again. Still, ash seeped through Ellen's. The urge to cough grew. She resisted it for a while, but finally it overwhelmed her and she had to stop as a powerful coughing fit overtook her. She hacked as her chest convulsed. Her throat ached. Ty watched her, worry in every line of his body. She held up her hand, tried to indicate she was okay. But she wasn't. When the coughing fit passed, leaving trails of sooty tears running down her cheeks, they were able to move on.

They made it to a clear spot next to a rock outcrop. No downed trees. Mud underfoot, ash and mud both making for slippery footing, but they were as far as they needed to get, not to McNeil point, but above the line of downed trees, where someone might spot them. The air was a bit cleaner than it had been when they left the lava tube. Was it that time had passed since the initial eruption, or was there more of a western breeze? Her urge to cough had passed, for now, at least. Small favors.

Ty shrugged off his pack and pulled out his cell phone. He turned it on. When Ellen pointed at it and raised her eyebrows in a question, he called, "The ping, remember?"

In the distance, the jet engine noise of the eruption still roared, louder now that they were closer to it. The airborne ash kept her from seeing the eruption as anything more than a darker patch to the east.

"If they are looking for survivors, they may be able to find us this way, with the phone."

"Oh crap. My phone," she said. It was down in his car. Burned to a crisp, no doubt. Her life was in that phone, every number, address, birthday. She probably couldn't even remember her mother or Claire's number without that phone.

"What about it?"

"Never mind," she yelled. "Stupid thing to worry about."

He unhooked his tent from his pack, snapped it open and staked it into the ash-covered ground. "We're going to have to clean it often to keep it looking bright enough to see from the air."

Faintly, she could hear the rare pop or crackle from the eruption. Once, she heard a whistle off to the east, like a firework taking off on July 4.

"I'm never going to see another," she said.

"Another what?"

"Anything. July Fourth, I was thinking. Or Christmas or school year or enraging school board meeting or friend or sunset."

He gathered her into his arms. He spoke into her ear. "Maybe not. But hope costs us nothing. And giving up does cost. We have to keep acting as if we are going to make it."

She nodded into his gritty shirt, the ash scratching at her cheek. "Damn. It hurts to hug."

He guided her out to arm's length and ducked down to look at her face. "Feeling okay?"

"I'm good," she lied, grateful the mask and goggles must make it difficult for him to read her expression. She took off her backpack to find her jacket. She'd slap at the ash with that for all she was worth. He was right. If she was going to go down, she should go down fighting.

A trail of smoke rose from the tent. "Uh," she said. "I think the tent is on fire."

Ty spun around. "Crap." He looked over his shoulder at her. "Turn away."

"What? Why."

"I'm going to put it out."

She frowned, wondering why--"Oh," she said. "You're going to pee on it."

"Turn," he said, and she did, feeling the insane urge to laugh at the situation. After a few seconds he said, "okay."

She looked back, said, "Good job. Smart not to use the drinking water." She slapped at the ash on her side of the tent. The problem was, once beaten off the fabric, the ash didn't go anywhere but straight up. Much of it settled back down on the tent, dimming the color again.

"Great!" he yelled. "Keep at it. Look, we're getting more clearing of the ash in the air. I can tell there's a sky up there!"

Damned if he wasn't right. The sky was brightening. It wasn't blue, but it was heartening to see more light in the yellow haze. She could feel the breeze now, stiffening, coming from the west. The new ash from the volcano was getting blown away from them. Again she stopped to clear her mask. She took out a water bottle and gulped down a quarter of it. In the time she took to do that and put the water away, the tent didn't look much grayer than it had when she had stopped slapping at it. Her spirits rose a tiny bit. No more erupting, she mentally scolded the mountain. Bitch Librarian says, stop that right now.

She laughed at herself. Like she could intimidate a mountain the way she could an eleven year old.

"What?" said Ty

She was about to say "nothing," and then she heard it. A thwupping, rhythmic.

Ty heard it too. His head canted back as he scanned above them. "A helicopter." With a powerful yank, he pulled the tent from the ground and began waving it overhead. "See us. See us," he said.

Ellen waved her jacket too. She backed several feet away from Ty, thinking, if they don't see him, maybe they'll see me. Spread out for a better chance. The urge to yell for help was hard to quench, but it'd be useless. She could hear the sound, louder now, but where was the helicopter?

11:00 a.m. In the air north of Mount Hood's summit.

Norio fed another set of GPS coordinates to the pilot over the radio. The helicopter found the next location, swooped down to just above the glacier, and Akroyd aimed the COSPEC out the door and through the faint traces of a gas plume. Not much visible steam in this one.

"Getting good stuff now," called Akroyd.

"Why's that?" said the pilot. "Was something wrong before?"

Norio explained. "It's clear weather, for one thing. It also depends on sun angle. The higher the sun, the more accurate the readings. We'll lose it again about five or six tonight."

"Gotta be done before then anyway," said the pilot. "My girl's got a ball game."

Weird priorities, thought Norio.

"Okay, go up," said Akroyd.

Norio took another image with his smartphone. Not much to see from this far up. He had some nice shots of the four biggest plumes of steam from close up. When they finished, Akroyd shut the door and Norio breathed a sigh of relief at the reduction in noise. He asked the pilot, "How much more fuel?"

"Ninety minutes, easy," said the pilot.

Time enough to check another GPS location Kate had sent him, based on new tiltmeter readings. The pilot took the information and swung the 'copter up and around in an arc, aiming for the spot.

Then his whole world changed.

The helicopter jerked as if it had run into a wall. Norio felt himself lift off the seat. A lurch, and they were suddenly on their sides. A rock back down so his head was up again. A twist the other way. He slid left. The pilot yanked at a control. Norio found his own hands were gripped on the seat harness. His feet had found purchase beneath the seat. His phone, still in his hand, dug into his palm. He hoped he hadn't broken it. The helicopter leveled but spun twice around, fast, like a centrifuge.

He could smell vomit. It must be Akroyd's. Norio had a stomach of cast iron, but now he worried about the pilot puking too and losing control. Glancing over, he could see the man was utterly focused. Good. Maybe they'd live through this. The helicopter stabilized.

"Shit," Corey said. His voice was faint. His knuckles were white where he gripped the control stick. Sweat beaded on his face. Norio glanced out the window and saw it. Mount Hood had erupted.

"Whoa," he breathed. The column of the eruption shot up beside them, thrusting far into the air. He could hear its roar even over the engine noise.

"Getting out of here," said the pilot.

"No no no. We need to take shots of this." His voice and the pilot's were both muffled. Maybe he'd lost some hearing. Had they been outside, this close to the shockwave, he might be deaf. Didn't matter. What mattered was taking advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

He got his phone aimed at the eruptive column and took stills. "Akroyd," he yelled. "Get a video of this."

No sound from Akroyd. Norio couldn't spare a minute to check on him. He switched from stills to video on his phone. Every second of recording he did was crucial, invaluable to the advancement of the science. Watch the billows there mid-column, black bundles swelling out. Point down to the source on the mountaintop, the very top, not the western flank. The lightning began. Look at it--wonderful! It increased, mad bolts of red streaking through the black ash. Suddenly, he realized they were drifting away, growing more distant from the column.

"Hey!" he said to the pilot. "Get back closer!"

"I'm not going to die," yelled the pilot.

"We won't die! Get upwind. Just stay out of the ash."

"I want to get on the ground somewhere safe."

"Man, this is history," yelled Norio. "You're part of it. You'll be famous. Get back closer."

The pilot looked skeptical, but the chopper slowly eased back toward the eruption. Norio went back to taking video. "Akroyd," he said as he shot. "Are you okay?"

"I can hardly hear you," came the voice, loud in the earphones.

"Shockwave," said Norio. Must have caught Akroyd just wrong. Norio's hearing was off, but he could still hear the wonderful noise of the eruption, of the living planet making itself anew.

"Hurts my ears."

"We should get him to a hospital," said the pilot. "We should maybe get all of us to a hospital."

"When we're out of fuel," said Norio, growing impatient with all these needless distractions. "I know we have plenty. Go higher." Pyroclasts fell from the column and sped down a flank in a *nuee ardente*. Amazing. He followed it with his phone camera until it was out of range beneath them and then went back to shooting the eruption column. Lightning still struck through the ash but not as fiercely.

Unbelievable that he had been up here to witness this. But there it

was, had to be believed. Like Pompeii. Or St. Helens. Or maybe--could it be?--more like Pelee. Pinatubo. Krakatoa. Depended on how long it erupted. Good sized for now, St. Helens at least. This was terrific, thrilling, and the research opportunity of a lifetime. Norio tingled all over and knew he was smiling like an idiot.

"I'm okay," said Akroyd. "Except my hearing. Sorry I puked. You guys say anything to me just then?"

"Good to hear you're okay," called the pilot. "But no. Your friend here is too busy being fuckin' Ansel Adams to talk."

"Move to the north a bit," said Norio. "Keep me pointed at the eruption."

"Asshole," said the pilot.

Norio didn't care what he was called. As long as he was obeyed, he didn't care about anything but the volcano.

"No, stay with the eruption," said Akroyd. "It's good. I'm fine." He didn't sound entirely fine but Norio approved of his professionalism. "You called Vancouver?"

He hadn't thought of it. He got the pilot to radio in to Kate and gave her a brief accounting as he kept shooting video. "We can see it from here," she said. "Stay as long as you can. Be safe. Talk later." She had her own stuff to deal with, which was good by Norio. He didn't want to ruin this moment with a bunch of human chatter. He wished there were some way he could be alone with his mountain right now.

The helicopter's interior went blessedly silent of voices for a long while. The eruption kept churning. It was beautiful, the seemingly endless supply of magma defying gravity, and the way the black clouds of ash billowed out here and there--we must be able to model that better, somehow. The top of the column rose kilometers above them now. They were but a speck compared to that.

"I'm getting out of here," said the pilot.

"No!" said Norio.

"I don't want to run out of fuel with that going on. So screw you," said the pilot, and he flew the 'copter to the east.

Again silence fell among the three men. Norio switched back to taking still shots. He caught images of the ash column from an increasing distance. The eruption was now an anvil more than a column, as atmospheric dynamics pulled the top of it to the southeast. He aimed the camera down to catch oblique shots of the path of destruction from the *nuee ardente*, the pyroclastic flow he had seen fall out.

"Can you hold up here?" he yelled to the pilot. "Five minutes. Three minutes, even."

The pilot glared at him but did as asked. Norio got some great wide-angle shots of the whole eruption. He realized he'd be looking at

these photos the whole rest of his life, nostalgic. Proud. Moved every time, exactly the way he was moved now by the power and beauty of what he saw.

"Half hour of fuel," the pilot said. "Need to get going."

Norio hated it, but he nodded. Five minutes passed, the eruption growing more distant. He felt a pang at leaving it.

"Wait," said Akroyd. "I saw something."

"Now you, too?" muttered the pilot.

"Somebody. There!" said Akroyd. "There are people down there. Hikers."

They were directly over the route of the pyroclastic flow. No way anyone had survived that. Not a chance in hell.

The helicopter spun around, hovered. "Where?" asked the pilot.

"Like five o'clock from where we are now. Back there."

The helicopter rotated, pointed itself south.

"Keep turning," said Akroyd. "Okay, stop. See over there on that ridge?"

"I see them," said the pilot.

Norio didn't. But, as the 'copter moved forward, Norio did finally see a splash of color. "That's ash down there," he said. "In the air. I don't know if your engine can take it." The ash had settled like a fog over the slope. The air was clear at their elevation, but a hundred meters down, it hung suspended in the air, a ghost of the *nuee ardente*. The size of the tephra, Norio realized, that explained the suspended particles--that hovering stuff was the tiny pieces of ash from the flow. Larger bits had precipitated out already. Any breeze would keep the lighter bits aloft, maybe for hours.

"I'll radio it in," the pilot said. "Someone's gotta get them."

The eruption was out the wrong window now for Norio to get shots, as the helicopter hovered with its nose pointing just east of due south. He turned and looked back at Akroyd, pushing the headset off so he wouldn't be yelling over the pilot's radio call. "You feeling okay?" he called back.

Akroyd pulled down his mike too and yelled, "Worried about my hearing. But I'm okay. Sorry about puking," he said again.

"Didn't hardly notice," Norio said, which was true. Once he saw the eruption, every other sensory input had been shoved to the back of his brain. Akroyd could have puked right on Norio's back and he probably wouldn't have cared. He turned to the front again and put his headset back on.

The pilot finished up on the radio. "Okay, I've reported the hikers. Let's go," he said, increasing their altitude, and they turned back west.

To the right, Norio could see the line of the Columbia River in the distance. Ahead of them, the mountain fell rapidly away to foothills.

Another explosion, to their rear and left. Norio leaned over trying to see around the pilot. "What do you see, Akroyd?"

"East flank, a lateral eruption, behind us a couple miles. Right where the glacier was melting, I think."

Ah. The pattern of activity today was making more sense to Norio. Now that the magma had erupted, the last two months fell into place for him. His mental movie of the mountain's cycle was complete. "How big's the secondary eruption?"

"Small, compared to the vertical. Small, compared to St. Helens. At least, so far."

"Fuck it," said the pilot, and turned.

"What are you doing?" Norio said.

"Going back to get those people we saw. Can't leave them there. What if it erupts right under their feet?"

"There's no sign of that happening."

"I don't like you very much."

Norio shrugged. He literally could not care about what the pilot thought of him, except insofar as it got him cooperation. He wanted to remind the pilot that *he* had said the fuel was low, that they had to get back, but he thought the pilot wouldn't react well to that. *People*. Give him the predictability of a volcano any day.

Five minutes later, they were coming down into the hovering layer of ash. Norio waited to hear the sound of the engine coughing. Ash was dangerous to engines. And with a helicopter, he wondered if it wouldn't also get into the bearings of the rotor, mix with the grease, keep it from rotating freely, grind down crucial parts. Moreover, the ash was grit, pumice stone in miniature, so it could and would grind away working parts of any machine with every second. In too many ways, flying through the ash could kill them.

He looked over at Corey's face, but it was grim and set. He might be making a choice that would kill them all by descending into the ash, but Norio could see there was no way he was going to talk the man out of rescuing those people. So be it.

As they dropped into the fuzzy world of ash, he smelled sulfur. Norio waited for the engine to cut out, but it didn't. The pilot circled once, found a place to land, and got them onto the ground. Fine ash billowed up around the windows as they landed. The slowing rotors kicked up more. Norio helped Akroyd with opening the door, and he jumped out, kneeling down to look at the ash.

The two people ran over. Let Akroyd deal with them. While he was down here, he'd take a sample of the ash on the ground. Fresh *nuee ardente* ash--he tried to think if he'd read any papers on its composition before. Maybe he'd find something new.

In two minutes, the two hikers were loaded into the helicopter, the

woman sitting on the man's lap in the fourth seat, two backpacks stored behind them, and Norio jumped back in his seat, tucking away his sample. He glanced back and saw Akroyd had cleaned up his vomit. Not that these passengers were likely to complain about the amenities.

The pilot got them into the air again and turned to the north, radioing in a cancellation of his rescue request. "Five souls on board now," he said, and signed off. They were five hundred meters from where they picked up the hikers, a couple hundred off the ground, and that's when the engine lost power.

"We have to get out of this ash," Norio said.

At almost the same time, Akroyd said, "We have to get on the ground."

The pilot took Akroyd's advice and got lower, skimming the surface only twenty meters up. He headed them northwest, away from both eruptions. Below them, the swath of destruction from the *nuee ardente* gave way to trees again. Dust-covered trees, but upright and living trees, unlike those mowed down by the pyroclastic cloud. The helicopter rose up above the treetops.

"There's a road!" yelled the ash-covered man in the back seat.

"I got it," said the pilot. He swung them to the left, over a patch of short green pine trees that still had all their branches, aiming for the dirt road. And then the engine was gone altogether, dead quiet.

Norio could hear the distant roar of the volcano and the sound of his heart pounding in his ears, but from the helicopter, there was only silence. He expected the woman to scream, but she didn't. None of them made a noise.

Norio heard branches snap as the helicopter coasted down and hit the tops of the pine trees. He clung to the seat harness as they tumbled over onto the left side, caught a branch, snapped it off, and lurched down again. The helicopter smashed against a trunk--Norio's teeth clacked together painfully--and fell again, on its side, the pilot and new passengers lower, Norio and Akroyd higher.

At the end, it turned over a little more, canting towards upside down, but not making it all the way. With a final bang, it came to rest on the forest floor.

Norio held his seat back as he turned to get a look at those in the back. They were alive. He caught sight of the undamaged COSPEC and sighed in relief. Somehow, the hiking man had kept hold of the woman in his lap. As Norio watched, he let her go carefully and she slid down until she came to an upright position, perpendicular to the rest of them, sitting on what had once been the left interior wall.

He turned back to Akroyd. "You okay?" Akroyd nodded. "Get the COSPEC safe. We need to check outside that the DOAS is okay, too."

Thankfully, it had been bolted to Norio's side so wasn't crushed under the wreck.

"How's Corey?" Akroyd asked.

Norio popped his seatbelt and slid his legs over until he was braced against the side of the pilot's seat. The man was not moving. Eyes closed. But he was still strapped in snugly. Norio squatted down, grabbed the pilot's seatback to hold himself off the man's body, and reached in to feel his neck. A healthy pulse pounded there. The pilot moaned. His eyelids fluttered.

"He's alive," said Norio. "Can you get the door open?" As Akroyd moved to do that, Norio said to the pilot. "Hey, buddy. Corey. You hurt?"

Another moan. Norio wondered if the fuel left in the helicopter's tanks could explode. In the movies it would. But in real life? Maybe not. Still, he didn't want to hang out in here and find out the hard way. He jostled the pilot's shoulder. "Wake up."

"Five more minutes," the pilot said.

"Can you move? Does everything work okay?" Norio said,

The pilot's eyes finally opened and focused on Norio. "My leg," he said.

Cautiously, Norio crawled forward, trying not to put his hands anywhere on the pilot's body until he knew more about the man's injuries. The pilot's left leg was twisted and caught somehow in a crumpled section of metal down where the floor and wall met. "Can you move your arms? Head?"

The pilot gingerly tested those parts. "I'm okay. I think. But my leg isn't."

"Can you move it?"

The pilot tried. His lips pressed together and his eyes filled with tears. "I think it's broken. No power in it to push."

The door finally slid open above him. Norio said to the hikers, "You two get out and walk away from here to a safe distance. I'll call you back if I need you. And Akroyd, look at our equipment out there and make sure we can save the data."

"Where's my pack?" the woman said. As the three of them fumbled around getting out, Norio cautiously made his way down into the well at the feet of the pilot's seat. The pilot's foot was jammed under a folded piece of the wrecked chopper. Norio reached in and felt around. The foot wasn't pulped, at least. He checked his own hand--nope, no blood. Should be relatively easy to free him.

"Hang on," he told the pilot. He grabbed the man's ankle and started to pull. The pilot shrieked.

Norio let go and backed away. "Sorry."

"Leg's broken. Tibia, I think."

"You have a tool box in here? I think we can pry open that bit of crushed metal and get your foot free. But it's going to hurt pulling you out."

The pilot's face had broken out in sweat. "Tool box is bolted in, behind the rear seat."

The others had climbed out. Norio crawled to the back, found the toolbox, and dug through it. The longest flat screwdriver. Channel locks. A vice grip. Good quality tools, too. A crowbar would be better, but he could make do with what was here.

It wasn't a pleasant procedure for either of them, but, prying and pulling at the bent metal, Norio finally freed the pilot's foot. "Open your seat belt," he told the pilot. "I'll pull you up. Going to hurt, but I don't know how else to do it."

"Can you manage alone?" The pilot looked at him doubtfully. His face was pale.

"Easier than trying to fit two people in here. There's not enough to hang on to for leverage. I promise not to drop you."

He kept the promise, but barely. The pilot outweighed him by forty pounds, easily. But Norio's legs were strong from so much time hiking up and down the mountain, and he braced them on the side of the seats and used them to power them both up toward the open door. He got the pilot up to the passenger's seat and had him hang tight there. Norio climbed onto the outside of the helicopter and looked around for the others.

"Hey, fella," he called to the hiker. "What's your name again?"

The man jogged over. "Ty."

"Give me a hand here."

From outside the doorway, there was more room to maneuver, and the two of them got the pilot pulled out and onto the rounded side of the machine. Norio held him in place while Ty jumped off, and Norio slid the pilot over to Ty, who braced him while Norio clambered down. Together, they eased the pilot onto the ground.

Ty yelled over to the woman, "Bring me my pack."

The woman and Akroyd both came over, the woman toting both packs. Norio still wanted to keep them away from the helicopter in case of fire, but he saw the futility in that. He didn't smell fuel.

Ty pulled off his sleeping bag and unrolled it onto the ground next to the pilot "You feel faint at all?" he asked.

The pilot shook his head. "Just stupid for breaking my damned leg."

"Not your fault," said the woman. She took a bottle of water off her backpack and offered it to the pilot who toasted her and took a swallow.

"We'll get you down the mountain, no problem," said Ty. "There

are four of us. We'll improvise a stretcher, use my sleeping bag for that, and carry you out."

"No, leave me. Send back help."

"You're crazy," said the woman. "You risked yourself getting us out of that mess, even sacrificed your helicopter to it. No way are we leaving you here."

Ty took charge of the pilot, and that was fine with Norio. Ty sent Akroyd off to find two sturdy branches to use as poles for the stretcher. He got his girlfriend down on the ground to distract the pilot with talk. He took a folding knife from his pack and slit the pilot's jeans from the knee down. Norio went over to look at the leg over Ty's shoulder.

Ty glanced up at him. "Not open, not compound. He can't walk on it, but he'll be fine."

"If the wind changes. Or if the eruption kicks up--"

"I know," said Ty. "Believe me, I know."

Akroyd called over, "How did you guys stay alive? The track went right over you."

"We'll tell you as we walk down," said Ty. "Let's deal with this first. Do you know where we are? We saw a road from the air, right? Just a little fire road, narrow track, but you guys saw it too?"

The woman and pilot agreed they had. After a brief discussion, they decided it was downhill and off to their left. "Mind going to look for it?" Ty said to Norio.

"Not at all," said Norio, happy to get away by himself for a few minutes. He took off cross-country through the trees. When the others were still in sight, he stopped to make a trail marker for himself so he could get back here with no trouble. It took him a little more than ten minutes to find the road, which he then tracked back up, trying to find the shortest path back to the wreck. He hiked back up to the others, who were finishing up the construction of a stretcher for the pilot. The hiking couple had changed clothes and cleaned their faces of the worst of the ash.

Ty had sacrificed his expensive-looking sleeping bag by cutting slits at the toe end to weave the poles through. He had cannibalized some wires from the crashed helicopter to lash the thing tidily together. Norio was grateful he had managed it so quickly and efficiently.

"Got the road," Norio said. "All we have to do is follow it. It's sure to merge into a wider road."

"As long as it doesn't turn back into that pyroclastic thing," said the woman.

Norio had a thought. "Has anyone tried the radio? In the 'copter, I mean?"

They all shook their heads. Norio climbed back into the wrecked aircraft, realized he didn't know what to do to get electricity to the radio and went back to ask the injured pilot.

"If there are no lights on, it's dead. There's a battery switch in the center console. Labeled clearly. Just flick it off and on, and if you don't get lights, you're out of luck."

Norio went back and tried, but the onboard radio was definitely dead. He got out his own radio and tried to raise Vancouver. He wasn't surprised when he got nothing but faint static. They were in the middle of nowhere, maybe behind a ridge from the nearest antenna, in a forest of tall trees. He tried his cell phone, got the search signal and, after watching it fail to find a signal for fifteen seconds, turned it off. He reported back, "No communications," to the others.

They had a discussion over their gas testing equipment, which Norio did not want to leave. Finally, he convinced them it was valuable, that he'd haul the heaviest piece, and they had to take it. Or he wore them down on the point--it didn't matter to him if that's all it was. The woman spread her sleeping bag over the pilot and tucked it in around him, causing the pilot to blush and stammer an objection at the attention, but he was thoroughly ignored by the woman.

It took Norio and Akroyd another twenty minutes to unbolt the DOAS with the pilot's cache of tools. He convinced the hikers to give up their backpacks so that he and Akroyd could haul the gas testing gear in there, and the woman grumbled but acquiesced. She tucked in a few extra items from her pack at the side of the stretcher and filled her jacket pockets with others. By the time they were all ready to pick up the stretcher, it was after two o'clock by Norio's watch. But with the solstice only days away, they'd have light for six more hours. It might be just enough time to get down to a main road--if the volcano had no more surprises in store for them.

South flank, forest road 309, 11 a.m.

Jim Yang trudged up the road. It wasn't the slope of the hill that was slowing his pace; it was his reluctance to see his father. He knew that his running off as he had was rude, but more than that, his father would see it as proof positive that Jim's soul was in worse trouble than ever. It was going to take nasty herbs and more shaman visits and probably sacrificing a whole pig to fix that.

That meant money spent, money he'd rather see be spent on fun things. It meant risking getting into trouble with the authorities over the pig sacrifice. Jim's father had come to the States as a teenager and wasn't as steeped in the old ways as some Hmong fathers, but whenever something went wrong, whenever there was something he couldn't understand or control, he reverted to the old ways.

Jim knew that whatever was coming his way next would be his own fault. If it took a weekend of the shaman, a whole week of sacrifices, a month of gagging herbs, he had no one to blame but himself. He wished he could explain himself to his parents, explain what school was like, what his friends were like, what he was interested in, the ways in which he wanted to be more American than Hmong. But anything he said would either hurt them or confuse them.

So the whole trick to ending this cycle was keeping better control of himself. He tried, really he did. But sometimes, the pressure inside him built and built and just needed to burst out of him. Hell, maybe it *was* a demon, a *dab*. He felt possessed sometimes, felt a roiling turmoil inside that seemed hardly a part of himself.

An explosion split the air, making him duck. He turned around and stared down the road. WTF? Maybe a car exploded or...? The ground beneath him was rumbling, like he was standing next to a fleet of idling school buses. Then he saw the dark cloud rising in the sky. He knew what it was, the volcano. They'd learned about volcanoes in eighth-grade science. The volcano he was standing on was erupting. His family! He turned and raced back up the road.

Within seconds, he was panting. He forced his legs to keep pumping. He gasped for air. His calves burned. His steps were ridiculously slow, cartoonish.

And then the rocks fell. Pebbles fell on him, like someone had picked up handfuls of hot gravel and had thrown it at him. They smacked him on the head, bounced off his shoulders, drummed on the road around him. Where they touched bare skin, they pricked like hot needles. The gravel grew smaller and then it was a cloud, a storm of

tiny hot particles that stung as they hit. Jim couldn't see. His eyes watered. He had to close them. The taste of the stuff--bitter--filled his mouth, and he spat.

He yanked his T-shirt up over his nose and mouth. He wanted to rub his eyes, he *needed* to rub his eyes. But he knew not to, somehow knew that was a bad, bad idea.

He staggered blindly up the road. He ran into something. A tree? Between keeping his eyes mostly closed and the cloud of ash raining down on him, he was having a hard time keeping on the road at all. And how would he find his family? He let one eye open just a crack, hoping his lashes would filter out the worst of it.

Out of the dim world, a big dark shape appeared, moving at an angle past him. A black bear, almost close enough to touch. Jim's heart leapt into his throat as he stopped dead, but the bear cared no more about Jim than Jim cared about an ant. It kept running until it was swallowed in the fog of ash.

Mother. Father. Lida. The thought of getting back to them propelled him forward again. He stumbled on, wanting shelter, knowing there was none, not nearer than the car.

It seemed forever before he finally staggered to a stop in a pool of yellow light. His father had parked the Kia in the middle of the road and had the lights on. The ghostly car didn't appear until he was right upon it.

Jim found the back door and pulled it open. He tried to brush himself off but the damp stuff clung to him, and he saw it was useless.

"Get in!" called his father.

Jim climbed in next to Lida, who gripped her wildflower book. His mother turned and asked him, in Hmong, if he was hurt. His parents made a great effort to only speak English to Jim and Lida, and that his mother had reverted to her native tongue told him how anxious she was. He reached forward and she took his filthy hand. "I'm sorry," Jim said.

"But are you hurt?" she insisted, in English.

"I don't think so." Letting go of her hand, he reached up to brush some of the ash from his face. It stung. He said, "It feels like a sunburn."

His mother looked more worried. "I have nothing to help you."

"I'll be fine, Mother. But I'm getting the car filthy." The rest of them had only the lightest coating of ash. They must have left almost everything where it was at the campground and jumped right in the car. Had Jim not picked today to freak out, he could have too. Anything wrong with him, he realized, he had earned.

His mother said, "Father worried a mountain demon was let loose."

The thought of adding loosened demons to whatever else the

volcano was throwing at them seemed overkill to him. The material world was scary enough right now. Why imagine the magical one?

"We must go," said Father, and he put the car into gear. Jim snapped on his seat belt and peered anxiously through the front windshield. How could his father see the road? From the back seat, it was invisible. The headlights reflected off the ash in every direction. It was noon at the latest, Jim guessed, and yet through the side window the ash darkened the world so that it looked like dusk out there.

He said softly to Lida, "Are you okay?"

She nodded. But she didn't look okay. Her face was pale, her lips pinched. She looked less like the happy child he was used to and more like a worried old person.

Jim's hands itched. He looked down and saw how coated with ash they were. His T-shirt wasn't any good for wiping them off. It too was coated, and where he had pulled it up onto his face, it was darker, with damp-looking black splotches where his nose and mouth had been, creating a Halloween mask version of a human face. His mother and father were focused on driving now. He couldn't bother them for a towel or tissue, if that'd even help, which he doubted. He'd have to live with it. His eyes itched and again he had to struggle mightily against the urge to touch them. At last, he tucked his fingers under his legs, pinning them there.

The car slipped, the rear of it coming around, as if they had hit a patch of ice on a bridge. Jim's father somehow got the skid under control, but he slowed further. At this speed, Jim could easily have outpaced the car.

For long minutes, they drove in silence, tension filling the air. Twice more, the rear of the car fishtailed. Jim could see no way they'd make it back to the highway at this rate.

They were driving north, down the same slope Jim had just run up. There was no other way out but this road. With the ash coming down steadily, the road would only get worse. Jim's mother turned on the radio and scanned through the frequencies, but she only got static. Shouldn't there have been radio? The creepy thought struck Jim that they were dead, had driven far from the realm of life and into some strange in-between world of ash and solitude and no other people. He shivered at the idea.

The back of the car spun again and, this time, came around a full 180 degrees. Lida made a small whimpering sound. "Don't worry," he said to her, though he was plenty worried. The spin stopped. The car's engine died.

Father turned the key and the car coughed, but it died again immediately.

Back in eighth grade, they had seen two videos about Mt. St.

Helens and one had spent several minutes on the Yakima ashfall. "It might be the air filter," Jim said, surprised to remember the detail. "The ash clogs them. Pop the hood and let me out."

"No, you stay here," said his mother.

"It'll only take me a second."

"I go," said his father.

"No," said Jim. "I'm already filthy with ash. No sense all of us being. You guys stay in here."

"You know how to fix this?" asked his father.

"Yes." He had taken a half-term of auto shop in the winter; he could gap spark plugs, change oil, change tires, replace fuses, fuel filters and air filters. His father finally nodded his permission and Jim took a deep breath, held it, and sprang from the car. Fumbling the hood open, he popped the cover off, pulled out the air filter and banged it against the front bumper hard, five or six times. He flipped it upside down and banged it a few more times. He couldn't look through it to see if it was any cleaner; the air was far too ashy out here. He slipped the air filter back in, replaced the cover, and slammed the hood.

Inside the car, he let out his held breath and took grateful breaths of clean air. Cleaner, at least. A bit of ash was floating around inside the car, too, clearly visible when the his father flipped on the dome light to turn around and check on him.

Jim tried to remember how far away from the highway they were. And how far from there to the edge of the ash cloud? Would the eruption get worse?

Jim's father started the car again and this time, it stayed running. He steered them down the road again and they made their slow progress onward, slipping more and more often. They bumped into a tree on one skid, but at this speed, none of them were hurt.

Ten minutes later, his father stopped. "See that?"

"What?" asked his mother.

"The sign for campground turn-off."

"And?" said his mother, fear and worry turning her voice sharp.

"We should see if anyone is there. To help."

What could anyone else do to help? Jim wondered. They'd be as bad off as the Vangs.

Some bit of silent communication was passing between his parents. Jim knew enough to recognize it was happening, but he had never figured out half their codes.

His father steered the car to the left and bumped into something invisible in the ash. He backed up, tried again, and this time, he found the road that curved off into the campground. It took them five minutes to make the quarter mile into the parking area. Out of the

gloom rose a shape, a trailer. They drove past it to the dead end but saw nothing and no one else. Jim's father made a k-turn and went back to the trailer.

The car coughed and died again.

"You want me to see if anyone is in that place?" Jim said.

"Yes," said his father.

"And I'll clean the air filter again. Pop the hood, please."

He dealt with the air filter first. Then he stepped over to the trailer and followed its wall until he came to the main door. He pounded on it. No answer. He grabbed the handle, and to his surprise, the door opened. "Hello?" he called. He stuck his head in and looked around. Nobody. "Hello?" he called more loudly.

Jim climbed into the trailer, half-afraid he'd get shot as an intruder and shut the door to keep out the swirling ash. He looked around. It was like a house in miniature. Kitchen, sofa, dinette, an easy chair. An inside door at the rear that led probably to a bedroom or bathroom. "Is anyone here?" he called. No sound.

He jumped outside, got back into the car, and said, "It's unlocked. No one is there. I don't know why not."

"No truck," said his father. "They must take the truck somewhere."

"Will they come back?" asked Lida, the first thing she'd said during the drive.

"I think no, not now." His father looked back at Jim and Lida. "Jim needs to wash. Air is maybe cleaner in there for more time longer than in car. We will go in there to wait. Maybe it will stop soon."

Jim reached for the door handle again, but his father stopped him. "We will all go at once. Open car door once only. Take water from back of car. Open trailer door once only too. We must keep good air inside as long as we can."

He looked back and saw a jug of water in the rear next to his mother's wok and some odds and ends. He grabbed the water and said, "ready." Lida clung to her book.

They all dashed to the door of the trailer and Father opened it. They slipped inside, his father last, and he closed the door behind them. He locked it and gave it an extra pull.

Jim kicked off his shoes and left them in the little depression by the door where two steps led up. His family was all taking off their shoes too and leaving them lined up against the wall by the door.

Father went through the door to the rear room and came back. "The ceiling hole over shower was open. I shut." He motioned to Jim. "You come back into shower." He said to Mother, "You find clothes to fit Jim."

So weird. His father was honest to a fault, would never steal, would never enter a house uninvited, would never take someone's

clothes, but he seemed willing to throw out all those rules of a lifetimes without hesitation. It brought home to Jim how serious their situation was.

Jim went back and found a tiny bathroom, tiled in white, with a coating of gray ash on the floor where the open vent had let it inside. He glanced up and saw the vent, with a pile of bigger gravel piled atop the screen there. His father followed him. Jim stripped and stood in the shower. He turned the faucet, but nothing came out.

His father nodded, as if he expected it, and said, "I find controls." He went away and, a few minutes later, water sprayed out. Cold water. Jim shivered but made himself stand where he was. His torso was almost clean but his arms, head, and hands were filthy. Gray mud sluiced off his arms and down the drain. Bracing himself against the cold, he closed his eyes and stuck his head under the spray. Man, that was really freezing. He shuddered involuntarily. He grabbed for a bar of soap and drew it through his hair. When he tried to wash his arms, he realized they hurt. A lot. So did his face, his forehead especially. The soap made it worse. He looked down and saw splotches of vivid red on his arms. Here and there, a chunk of skin had peeled away. He was burned worse than he thought. He picked at a loose bit of skin. Ow! Man, he wouldn't do that again.

He let the water run over his face. He dabbed at his eyelids. Grit stung his eyes. He cupped his hands, filled them with water, and forced himself to open one eye as he ducked his face down into the water, blinking furiously in the pool of cold water. He did this three times with each eye. They still felt scratched, and a bit numb from the cold water, but he thought they were clean. Teeth chattering with the cold, he shut off the shower. A towel hung on the door. Someone else's towel, though, which he didn't want to use. He stood and dripped for a couple minutes before stepping onto the bare floor. There was a cabinet below a sink and he opened that. No towel, but a stack of a half-dozen washcloths. He took them all out and dried himself on them, soaking the cloths one after the other, using the last one to scrub at his hair. Then he used them to mop up the ash on the floor, and he shoved them all into a corner with his clothes, remembering at the last moment to rescue the shaman bracelet from his pocket. He had to turn on the shower once more to wash his hands of the ash he'd picked up while cleaning.

Again, he examined his arms. His mother was going to faint when she saw those burns. Maybe there was something for them in the medicine cabinet. The door to the bathroom opened and his father handed him a sweatshirt and sweatpants and backed out to give Jim room to dress. The clothes were a bit tight, but at least they were clean. In the medicine cabinet, he found a tube of antibiotic cream

and a box of bandage strips. He grabbed them up and opened the door to the hall.

His father was waiting outside. "You look better."

"I feel better."

"You did well with the car, knowing what to do."

His father didn't praise lightly. Jim said, "Thank you." It was good luck that he'd had the shop class so recently. If this had happened next year, or the year after, he might not have remembered what to do.

"It is good to pay attention in school, you see? And this is time for you to grow up," his father said, lowering his voice. "I don't think I can drive the car more. Too slippery. If we crash on mountain, then what?"

"Okay," said Jim.

"But bad things might happen."

As if bad things hadn't happened so far.

"And I need for you to keep doing well, like with the car. You quit being a boy now. The family needs you."

"Okay," said Jim, but he didn't know exactly how he was supposed to do that.

"You listen to me."

"I'm listening."

His father studied him, finally saying, "Go show your mother you are well."

In the main part of the trailer, his mother had found a saucepan and tea bags and had set about heating water. She had a scissors and was decapitating the tea bags, pouring out the brown tea leaves onto a saucer. It made him feel a little better, seeing her doing something so normal in such bizarre circumstances. Lida sat at the dinette table, her wildflower book still grasped in both hands, as if it were some talisman that might protect her from what was happening outside.

Mother came over and examined him. She saw the burns on his arms and face and made a worried sound. Silently, he handed her the tube of cream and bandages. He sat down by Lida and let his mother smear the stuff over his burns. It wasn't so much that he wanted to be like a little kid and have his mother play nurse to him, but that he knew it would comfort her to do it. Okay, maybe it would comfort them both.

When she was done, and Jim had two dozen bandages decorating his arms and forehead, Father came back into the room. "I checked all windows are closed. We are safe in here."

For now, Jim thought. "How long--" he began, but then he looked at his sister and her strained face. Never mind. His father couldn't answer how long they'd be trapped here, and his mother wouldn't know, either. They'd stay as long as they needed to. At least they had

water. Would the ash seep in the cracks of the windows, though? Was it like that horror movie he saw with the evil mist that you could no way keep out?

The water on the stove hissed as it came to a boil, and his mother went to make them tea. Lida, who would normally get up to help, seemed in shock, rooted to her seat. "Hey, Leed," he said. "Show me some of the wildflowers you've collected."

She blinked at him, dazed.

Seeing a light switch overhead, he flipped it on, making an island of light over them, and sat by her. "Show me in your book. Let's see how you're doing at identifying them."

Slowly, she put the book on the table, but her hands did not release it. Jim rested his hand on hers and said gently, "Only if you want."

Under his fingers, her grip slowly eased. She opened the book, turning pages carefully, and plucked out a white flower on a long reddish stem. The colors were fading now. Jim looked in the book and compared her sample to the picture on the open page. "I think this is it. Good job with the I.D." Her silence was starting to scare him. "Why don't you read to us about it?"

She shook her head.

"Okay. How 'bout if I do, then?"

Slowly, she pushed the book toward him. His mother served his father tea, then served Jim, and finally Lida as Jim read aloud more than he had ever wanted to know in his life about lousewort.

When he was done, his mother said, "I think we had when I was a child. I remember a flower much like this, in mountains there."

"Maybe it was a medicine?" he said.

"If so, I have lost that knowing. I know to put ginseng on your burns." She looked worried again.

Jim pushed the book back toward Lida and said, "show us the next." And in this way, they passed an hour, and Lida relaxed a little, was even willing to say a word or two in response to his questions. When she did, Jim felt like he'd accomplished something more important--and harder--than anything he'd done so far this week.

His mother hunted through the cabinets, muttering about the food they had left back at the campsite. Jim sat, longing for a game or computer to distract him. His father sat with his eyes closed, napping or thinking. Lida was stroking the edges of her book where it sat on the table, no longer holding it in that death grip.

A creaking came from overhead. They all looked up, except his mother, who was focused on her work in the kitchen. Then another creak, louder. As he watched, the center of the trailer ceiling visibly buckled and something up there snapped, like a breaking stick.

"Shit," he breathed. For once, his father didn't say anything about bad language.

"What is it?" said Lida, her voice high and tense.

"The roof," said his father. "The stuff is maybe too heavy on it."

"That's right," said Jim. "I think it could collapse with the weight of the ash." With them under it.

Camas, noon.

Chad continued to stare at the erupting volcano, riveted by the sight.

"Wow," Francie said.

The hearing in his right ear was messed up; her voice sounded like it was coming through a cotton ball. It was impossible to focus very long on that, or on his nausea, when the distant column of black ash pushed up and up into the distant sky.

Suddenly, lightning broke out in the ash, red flashes all through it, white bolts snapping out of the edges. A chunk of the cloud dropped down and he could see it tear down the steep white slope. Above it, the lightning continued to flash.

Chad's heart pounded. It was like the end of the world over there. Angry gods hurling red thunderbolts. The ash column, colored darks shades of gray, continued to rise and rise. In just moments, it towered far above the mountain. As he watched, it began to spread out laterally at the top, a mushroom cloud of dark menace.

Francie licked her finger and stuck it into the air, muttering "Please please please."

"Please what?"

"The wind. Thank God, it's from the northwest," she said.

"Oh," he said. "Ash. Ashfall, you were thinking."

She nodded. "We have to--." She looked around, left, right, back at the sky. Then she turned to him. "Fuck a duck, Chad, I don't know what we have to do." She grabbed her radio and said her name into it. "Requesting orders, over," she said, but the radio stayed silent for several more seconds. Maybe they were asking themselves what to do now, too, back at the firehouse.

While she waited, Chad continued to watch the eruption, which was not slowing. If anything, it was churning harder. The ash billowed out and billowed out. The top of the mushroom expanded, shading the glaciers, going lighter gray with distance from the mountain. He tested the wind himself. It was blowing almost exactly away from them, west-southwest. Maybe from the side, you could see the ash drifting off to the southeast with the wind, but from where they stood, it was a symmetrical mushroom cloud, a round bulb of light gray stuff at the top, a billowing darker column in the middle.

The longer he watched, the more dissociated from reality he felt. This had to be a dream, right? For the first time in his life, he understood what "surreal" meant. The red lightning had just begun to

taper off--or maybe it was just getting hidden from sight by more ash--when the radio crackled to life. "Hold for new orders. Keep your radios clear, everyone."

Chad's nausea faded. His ear still rung but his knees felt better able to support him. He felt wholly impotent against the vision of the volcano, but he steeled himself for action. Whatever orders came, he would do his very best.

Then the screaming started.

What the--?

Chad whirled around looking for the source. A man stumbled around the corner of an apartment building, his scream fading off to a wail. He tripped and fell in the mud. "Help me, help me," he said. "Somebody help, please."

Chad ran towards him. His front foot went into a slide on the gooey mud. His free arm pinwheeled to find balance. Just before he was going to fall, his toes slammed into the hidden edge of a curb and brought him to a jerking halt. His momentum pulled his upper body forward, but he was able to regain his balance before he face-planted in the mud. Francie had gotten ahead of him now, stepping quickly but carefully. He followed her. The man was wailing now, a pitiful sound.

"What's wrong?" Francie called to him.

"They're in my head!" he said.

She pulled up short, glancing back at Chad, and continued moving towards the man more cautiously. She stopped a good six feet from him. "Who is?"

"*They* are. Can't you hear them?" He stood and wiped at his face with his shirt sleeve, which was filthy, leaving a patch of mud around his eyes. "They're singing. Devils singing."

"It's okay," said Francie. "We can help."

Chad arrived at her side with the first aid kit, but it probably was of no use here. Maybe if he needed to whack the guy on the head with it if he got violent. The guy was crazy, right? Voices? Devils? No--in a flash of intuition, he understood. "It's the blast," Chad whispered to Francie.

Francie spared a quick glance at him.

"You just took the blast wrong," Chad said to the man. "It's fine. There aren't devils singing. Your ears are ringing. Mine are too."

The man's blue eyes shone at him from the mud-covered face. "You hear them too?" He swiped at the air around his head, as if brushing away mosquitoes.

"No. I mean, sure, yeah, I hear them. In a way. But they're not devils. They're harmless."

"No, they aren't," said the man, but he sounded less certain. His

frenetic slapping at the air stopped.

"Let's get you inside," said Francie. "It'll be better there."

"We can hide from them?" He trapped his hands under his armpits.

"You bet," she said, moving forward slowly, palms up, showing him she had no weapons, nothing to threaten his safety. She turned and mouthed to Chad, "Stay back."

He watched them closely, worried the guy would freak out worse, and he'd have to wade in and try and subdue him without hurting him and before the guy hurt Francie.

She reached the man. "Where do you live?" she said. "In this building?"

"Washougal," he said, naming the town east of them.

"Ah. So we'll get you into this building right here." She gently took his arm and guided him over to the steps of the apartment building.

"Let's...." She looked back at Chad. "Let's go and sit on the steps, clear of the mud, and have Chad find us a nice place to hide. Is that okay?"

"Hide," said the man, nodding.

"You bet. We'll find you a safe place."

Chad stepped and slid his way along to the front door of the apartment and held it for Francie and the crazy guy. Once they were in, he looked around. Old building. A short hallway, four polished wood doors opening off it. A flight of steps up. Up was good. They'd be away from the sight of the mud. Maybe if the guy couldn't see the mud or the volcano, he'd be calmer. Though if Chad had guessed right and it was ringing ears bothering him, no place would be better than any other, and he'd just have to wait until his ears quit ringing. Chad's still were, though the ringing was fading. No way to tell if the crazy guy's was fading at the same rate, though.

He ran up the steps. At the front of the building, the landing opened up into a carpeted space that had a potted fake plant and a high window facing south. If they could keep the guy from looking out that window and at the mountain, it'd be as good a place as any to treat the guy.

He started banging on doors. The third finally opened a crack.

"Yes?" a woman's voice said.

"Chad Keppler, Camas Fire Department," he said.

The door opened to reveal a woman in her 40s or 50s, in shorts and barefoot. "Is there a fire?"

"No ma'am. We have an injured man we're caring for. Could I trouble you for some wash water? Bucket, empty milk jug, whatever you have."

"Of course, young man. I'll do that right away. Can I help with the man? Do you want to bring him in here?"

"Well, the guy is a little overwrought. Probably be better if you

stayed in there and he stayed out here."

"Do you know when the electricity will be back on?"

"No ma'am." He wondered if it had shorted out from the moisture or if lines had broken or if it had been turned off up the line somewhere.

He ran down and spoke in a low voice to Francie. "We can put the man in the hallway upstairs, or leave him here on the steps, whichever you want. I asked a resident for some wash water. But we'll wreck the place if we clean him up there on the carpet."

"We won't have him take a bath. Just get his hands and face clean, right, Joey?" she said to the man who was huddled beside her, his eyes closed, shivering despite the warm day. He didn't answer her but he mumbled to himself. Chad strained to hear but could make out no clear words. Chad worried that the man might start raving and flailing again and hurt Francie. Or hurt himself. Or run away and do damage elsewhere. Chad knew nothing about insanity. Maybe this guy wasn't even insane on normal days. Maybe he was just freaked. And who could blame him?

Chad got on one side of him and Francie on the other, and they guided him upstairs to the front hallway. The woman had set a bucket of water outside her door, which was closed again, Chad was glad to see. He didn't particularly want to be next to the crazy guy, either, with the non-stop mumbling monologue.

Francie helped the man clean his face and hands. She kept saying his name as she worked, kept up a steady stream of murmuring reassurance, counterpoint to the muttering from the man. Chad wondered how she had coaxed the name from him in the first place. Outside the window, Chad could see the volcano, still spewing. He moved to open the window. It resisted but when he pushed harder it opened with a squeal. Chad glanced back to make sure the noise hadn't set off their crazy man, but he seemed lost in his own world now. Chad stuck his head out and looked around. The volcano still was churning out stuff like it would never stop. The lahar mud stretched through every street he could see.

A passenger jet was coming in low over the Columbia River, a common flight path into Portland's airport. But this jet was low. Far too low. And Chad couldn't hear it. He could see it, big as you please, moving downriver. He strained to hear, but the city was quiet, eerily quiet for a midday. No traffic. He should be hearing jet engines. Maybe it was his hearing at fault?

"Francie," he said. "Over here, quick."

She hopped up and joined him.

"Did you see it?" The jet was out of sight now.

"Yeah."

"Did you hear it? I can't hear so well from one ear."

She spoke quietly. "I think its engines were out." She took her radio in hand. Speaking low, she called in while Chad kept his eyes on the crazy man.

^ ^ ^

On flight 8421, Dallas to Portland.

Aboard the Boeing 777, the flight crew hadn't seen the eruption, just ahead of them to the east. Had there been a window on the floor of the flight deck, it would have been an amazing sight, one seldom glimpsed from such an angle.

On the flight deck, the slight motion of the shockwave momentarily lifting them didn't warrant comment, no more than any other bit of random turbulence. As they descended toward the Columbia River, the crew prepared for the approach to PDX.

Air traffic control came on the radio. "All traffic, be advised that there has been an eruption, a volcanic eruption of Mount Hood. Southwest 8421 heavy, turn north immediately. XE643, descend to twelve zero zero to avoid heavy traffic." The voice went on with specific instructions to eight other flights, professionally calm but quick.

When there was a pause from the radio, Captain Bryce Smith said, "Roger that, Southwest 8421 heavy turning to heading zero now." To his first officer and navigator he said, "What's outside on your side, guys?"

Audrey Mack, his co-pilot said, "Seeing nothing."

The navigator, Jesus Perez, said, "Want me to go into the cabin to get a different view?" He was peering over the captain's right shoulder and out the port side of the plane.

"Too much hassle," the captain said.

Then flames shot out of the left engine. When they died back, the engine glowed with white light. The eerie light began strobing. In another two seconds, the flashing light was gone. The engine died.

The navigator went back to his seat, strapped in, and the pilots initiated engine shut down drill.

"Fire extinguishers armed," said Mack. Then, "shit."

"What?" Captain Smith was distracted by a light show at the front windshield, like an aurora, primary colors glancing off its surface like rain.

"I smell sulfur, don't you?" said Perez.

"Screw that, the starboard engine's flaming out, No. It's gone," said Mack.

"First officer," said Smith sharply. "You know what to do."

"Roger, initiating shutdown engine two," she said.

"Restart on engine one," said Smith.

"Restart," she said.

Bryce watched the port engine out the window, but nothing happened. Mack confirmed no restart. "Try again," he told her. "And keep trying."

The radio gave their flight again. "Southwest 8421 turn heading three-three-five, descend."

"Phoenix Center," he said into the radio, "Southwest 8421 heavy. Be advised we have lost both engines. Repeat, both engines flame out."

"Southwest 8421, are you declaring an emergency?"

"We are in a fall, Portland." A glide, in reality. They weren't dropping like a rock. They were soaring like a glider plane, a 250,000 pound glider plane. Gravity was taking them down, but at a low angle. The 777 had a 9:1 glide ratio. For every nine miles they moved straight forward, they'd drop a mile. Not that they had enough miles below them now for that to matter much. And not that he could go straight. He had to turn west to get out of the mountains, and turning ate up altitude. This situation fell under the heading "not ideal."

"Souls aboard, 8421?"

Mack said, "212."

"Two-one-two souls," confirmed Portland.

"Any assistance you have, we'd appreciate. Give us vectors and weather, please."

Air traffic control gave them a heading down the river--their regular flight path on any normal day. Captain Smith tuned out the radio chatter that cleared all traffic below and ahead of them and ran through his options. Ditching on the river would be better than ditching into the side of a mountain, of course. And far better for any civilians on the ground. But he wasn't going to ditch, not if he could help it. Volcano or no volcano, his would not be the name attached to a fatal crash. He tweaked flaps and rudders to get them on the right heading.

"Restart those engines," he said to Mack.

"I'm trying, sir."

The light show at the windshield was gone, at least. St Elmo's fire? That had been bizarre.

A flight attendant's voice came up. "Captain. We have smoke in the cabin."

What the hell now? "Go back and see, and let the marshal know what you're doing," he said to Perez. The crewman left, locking the door behind himself.

"Try a windmill," he said to Mack, doing his damndest to get them headed correctly with the minimum loss of altitude.

"Don't need to," Mack said. "Finally. Restart on one."

Smith felt control return. "Keep trying on two."

He leveled them out and got them over the river, following it to the west toward the airport. A dam passed under them. He thought through the dam locations, in case they needed to ditch. He'd want to do that well before another dam came up, or after the final one and well before the busy ports. That didn't leave him many choices of ditch sites.

He spoke to ATC. "Portland Center, Southwest 8421 has port engine restart."

"You're clear for runway four-two right, 8421."

Was he doing all he could? Again, he ran through a mental checklist. A memory of something he had read on the Iceland volcano a couple years back popped into his head.

Captain Smith took the moment to make a cabin announcement. "Ladies and gentleman, we have a slight problem. There has been a volcanic eruption in our path, and that is likely why you smell a bit of sulfur and see some haze in the cabin. We lost an engine for a moment but we have it back now. We hope this has not inconvenienced you in any way." He clicked off.

Mack: "Engine one is out again."

"I know," he muttered. He realized the passengers could see the flameouts, too, and was surprised they weren't screaming back there.

Perez came back and belted in. "No fire," he said. "You nailed it, Cap, what you said, but I don't know how you figured it out."

"Restart that engine," he barked at Mack. He was starting to get irked at the engines.

They were coming down faster again, gliding down the line of the river, losing too much altitude. Look at all the river traffic, boat, boat, ship, tanker. And what the hell was wrong with the river? It was all gray. Ships seemed stuck. Aw, man. He couldn't ditch in that stuff. Could they make the ocean? He thought they'd hit before the Pacific at this rate of descent.

"Mack," he said. "Any time."

"I'm trying. Trying both." He heard her say under her breath, "It's not like I can jiggle something."

As he was starting to get a little worried about the container ship right ahead of them, engine one caught again. Engine two seemed to be a goner. He lifted them a hundred feet and the container ship passed safely beneath their belly. He heard the breath of air Mack let out in relief.

The flight crew prepared for landing. Smith told the flight

attendants to get the passengers ready for a possible hard landing. From ATC he checked his approach vector. He willed engine one to stay with them, just a few more minutes, buddy, hang in there until we're on the runway and moving slower. He jogged them southwest, and west again, lining up with the runway and easing her down.

When the wheels touched, he could hear the cheering back in the cabin. On one engine, they taxied through fire trucks and ambulances and up to the nearest gate. The crew breezed through shutdown.

"I'd just as soon not go through that again," he said to his crew.

"Great job," said Mack.

"You too. Both of you." He made the same announcement to the passengers that he always did. "The weather in Portland is clear. Local time is 12:28 p.m. Thank you for flying Southwest."

And then his hand started shaking.

^ ^ ^

Chad kept his head out the window, trying to catch another glimpse of the jet, expecting to hear another explosion, this time of the jet hitting the river. Or a tree-covered island. Or the city of Vancouver. But nearly a minute passed, and he heard nothing at all but a few distant voices down on the streets.

"Okay," said Francie, coming back to his side. "Let's go."

"Where?" asked Chad.

"We'll get Joey someplace safe," she said, giving Chad a meaningful look.

Whatever that meaning was, Chad couldn't guess. "Sure," he said. "Let's get going."

They each took an arm and helped the silent man from the apartment building. There was tension in the arm Chad had, but not like the man was fighting to pull away. His battle seemed to be all internal, the tension coming from him bracing against himself. It was slow going through the slick streets. A clear word floated out from the man's babble from time to time: "Devil." "Shut up." "Mother."

None of that reassured Chad much. They aimed their charge north and finally made it to a street empty of mud, where a med van was waiting for them. They got their crazy man into the back, and one of the EMTs started trying to coax a doctor's name from him. The other was on a radio to a hospital, getting a doctor's orders. Francie and Chad backed out of the rear doors, closed them, and watched the van speed away.

"We're lucky he didn't fight us more," she said.

"What now?" Chad asked.

"Back to the firehouse," she said. "Didn't you hear the order on the

radio?"

He hadn't. "Okay. Let's go."

Though she must have been as tired as he, they strode quickly through the streets and back toward the firehouse. They had to wade back into the mud for two blocks to get there and, once more, it took careful balance to not fall in the slowly thickening mud. The water was taking its sweet time draining back into the river, but it was going.

When they arrived at the station, the place was chaotic. One fire truck was back, parked aslant in the driveway, mud splashed halfway up its sides. Firefighters congregated in small groups, murmuring together. Some rushed back and forth on errands. He and Francie wove their way back through the crowd. He nodded to some of the men he knew better. A.J. slapped him on the back as they passed each other. "Can tell you've been working hard by the mud on you!"

Francie said, "Can you take the first aid kit back to the supply room? Put it where we can grab it again quick if we need it." The kit looked as bad as them now, the sides coated with mud. He picked at a thin place in the coating, but it didn't flake off. Dried, it was like concrete.

Weaving through the communications center, he passed Kane standing behind one of the battalion leaders. As Chad opened the door to the storage room, Kane came up behind him.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Putting this down in here, for now."

"That is the most inappropriate thing I've ever seen."

Chad felt himself flushing, with anger more than embarrassment. He turned on Kane and wished, really wished, he were the kind of person who could drop his pants to make a point. He'd bend over and waggle his bare ass at the guy. How's *that* for inappropriate, he'd say.

But he only said, "I'm sure you'll recover from the trauma," and brushed past the man. He didn't know what Kane's problem was with him, but whatever it was, Chad resolved he'd never make it his own problem again. Kane's issues were no more Chad's than the crazy guy's had been. Let Kane slap at imaginary voices all he wanted, too. To heck with him.

Francie found him five minutes later in the kitchen, drinking his second bottle of root beer and tossing away food wrappers left behind by others.

"You don't need to do that," she said. "The chief's talking. Come on down."

He took his drink and followed her to the central bay of the station, where the fire chief stood on a pallet and addressed the men and women under his command. "They say it's going to happen again."

"What?" whispered Francie to another firefighter.

"Second lahar. On its way."

The chief was saying "--going to be here in two hours. We'll evacuate everyone from downtown."

"Evacuate and do what with them?" asked a voice from the front of the crowd.

"That's still being worked out. There's one shelter set up but we're working on two more."

"What about elderly or disabled?"

"Those of you who know of such a person from this morning, we're collecting those addresses. We'll deploy teams to those known addresses first, with stretchers. If you find others, radio it in. Carry them out if you have to."

Said, Chad thought, by someone who hadn't been working in the slippery mess out on the streets. He had an image of his feet sliding out from under him and him dropping some frail old lady and breaking her hip. Or neck, likely as not. Wouldn't it be best to leave her where she is?

But no one else was asking that. Maybe because it was a crisis, you took orders without question, even if you thought they weren't the right orders.

But the chief could have been reading his mind. "Three reasons to try and evacuate." He ticked them off on his fingers. "One, eruptions can last weeks. We may have continued flooding, waves of lahars from that. They could run out of food and drinking water in that time. Two, if the winds shift, we'll be screwed worse by the ash. So evacuate them from the flooded area before that happens. Three, the water company is already shutting off water and sewage in and out of the inundated areas, isolating them, trying to protect the rest of the system."

"What if there's a fire?" asked someone at the far side of the crowd.

"Vancouver fire will respond to the dry parts of town," he said.

"Under the flood?" He shook his head. Chad supposed they'd let a house fire burn. The mud would put it out eventually. But still, letting a fire burn? He knew it went against every instinct the firefighters had. He looked around at their grim faces. No, they didn't like that.

The chief cut his hand across the air in front of him. "Enough questions. We have only two hours to evacuate downtown and the streets along the rivers. Keep your hands free out there; travel light. Battalion chiefs, you have your assignments. Get going."

Francie ran back to the supply room and came back with the muddy first aid kit, putting it on the floor against a wall and flinging it open. "Grab a roll of gauze, tube of antibiotic cream, alcohol wipes, gloves. Two of the water bottles. Stick it all in your pockets." They scrabbled through the contents, filled their pockets, and were ready to

go in thirty seconds.

South Flank. Afternoon.

The roof of the trailer creaked again.

"What will we do?" asked his mother.

"We need to brush it off," said Jim. "With a broom, as big a broom as you can find."

"I will do it," said his father.

"No," said Jim. "I will. I've already been out in the ash for a long time. If it's bad for us to breathe that stuff, better me go up than you."

"If it is bad for you, don't go at all," said his mother.

"Would you please look for a broom? Or maybe a--whatdoyoucall it, the thing you sweep stuff into, little scooper thing with a handle." He mimed using one. "Dustpan, that's it. That might work better."

"You find. I will do it," said his father.

Jim was exasperated. "No, I'll do it. You tell me to act like a grown man, and when I do, you argue. Make up your mind."

His father studied him while his mother began rooting in closets, his thoughts indecipherable from his expression. Father finally said, "Be careful. Don't fall. It was slippery like ice on the road. Maybe same on the roof."

"Yes, Father." His mother came back with a broom and the dustpan. "Find me a handkerchief or something for my face, please, and while I'm out there more clothes for when I come in. These will be ruined, too."

When he had his face covered, he grabbed his shoes and went outside.

The ashfall was like a rainstorm, like warm, soft, slow rain. Flat flakes of ash swirled around him among tinier suspended bits that were more like fog particles. It must not be far past noon, but it was as dark as sundown on a city street. He stepped around the trailer, looking for some way onto the roof. He skidded once, falling to his ass, and reminded himself that the roof would be slippery too. And a fall up there much, much worse. So watch your effing feet.

At the rear of the trailer was a ladder to the roof, built right into the exterior wall, extending down to only waist-level. Each rung held a tiny mountain range of ash. He scraped off the lowest two rungs with his hand. A large step up got him onto the ladder. He wrapped his left arm around the upright leg of the ladder and grasped the broom in that hand while continuing to clean off the rungs, one at a time, using his right hand. The gritty, wet ash chafed his fingers and spilled down onto his mask. He wished he had gloves, a hat, goggles. Next time he'd look through the trailer for those. He knew there'd be a next time, with the ash falling this steadily. A step from the top he

was able to push the broom onto the roof and toss the dustpan up after it. The extra grip on the ladder from two hands reassured him. He skidded onto the roof on his belly then carefully stood.

He was ankle-deep in ash. He wondered what it weighed. At a guess? Maybe equal to a layer of bricks sitting on top of the roof. It couldn't be good. He took the broom and tried to sweep the area around his feet, but the ash barely moved. It was too sticky, heavy and wet. He was glad he'd asked his mother for the dustpan. He dropped to hands and knees and crawled around the edge of the roof, digging in with it and flipping off pan after pan of dust. He finished one trip around the outer edge of the roof.

He knelt in the patch he'd cleaned and shoveled more dust from inside and tossed it over the side of the roof. The next pass around, he moved further in still, and this circuit he had to carry each panful over to the edge to dump. In a spiral he worked toward the center of the roof, where a big piece of equipment--maybe air conditioner?--juttued up eight inches.

Finally, he was able to take the broom and brush off the thin remaining layer. The footing was treacherous now, and near the edges he took tiny sidling steps, trying to stay balanced.

At the front edge of the trailer, where the roof sloped a bit, his left foot slipped. His heart leapt into his throat. He leaned back, hoping he wouldn't go shooting off the edge. His heart pounding hard, he felt himself still sliding very slowly down the slope. He turned his feet into a snowplow stop, and just like with skiing or ice skating, it stopped his momentum. Carefully, he inched back to the flatter section, got onto hands and knees, and went back to his sweeping in that safer posture.

The process of getting the whole roof clean took a long time--an hour, he guessed. His family must be able to hear him up here, or else they surely would have come out looking for him, worried after all this time.

He went to toss the broom and dustpan over the edge, but just in time he realized that since he was probably going to have to come up again later, it'd be better to leave them up here. That way, he'd be able to use two hands getting down and back up the ladder. He tucked the tools under the edge of the air conditioner.

Going down the ladder, he felt his left foot slide across the ash. Before he could stop it, it slipped off the rung, and his heart leapt into his throat as he clung to the uprights. The ladder had gotten coated with ash while he was up on the roof, and there was no way to brush it off before descending. He got his foot back under him, twisted it back and forth until he felt his shoe tread grip the step, and continued down. If it wasn't so dirty, he'd have kissed the ground once he was standing on its reliable surface.

When he got inside, he kicked off his shoes again, opened the door for a moment to pound them against the exterior wall of the trailer, pulled his shoes back inside and locked the door. He stripped off the sweatshirt and mask and let it fall where he stood. Before anyone could ask him anything, he said, "Remind me, I want a hat and gloves the next time I go out."

His mother said, "Next time?"

"The way it's coming down, I'll have to go out every couple of hours. If we stay all night, I'll have to wake up to do it a couple times."

His father spoke up. "I should help."

"No, Father. Only one of us should do this." He looked around himself at puffs of the tiny ash particles drifting away. "Look at the ash I dragged in with me." He coughed and tasted metal. "And leave the sweatshirt right there, please. I'll put on the same clothes from now on when I go out. I need indoor clothes and outdoor clothes." With that, he went back to the shower and washed off all over again, his cuts and burns stinging, bandages falling off.

When he was finished with his shower, he dressed himself in strangers' clothes his mother had left stacked outside the bathroom door. He paused at the end of the central room. The roof wasn't creaking and popping any more. Lida was standing and staring out a window, still holding her book. Watching her, he thought of little kids with stuffed animals--she was clinging to that book in that same way.

He beckoned his father to the hallway and led him back to the bedroom. "I'm worried about the water," he said.

"Water? To drink?"

"I can't be taking a shower like this every time I go out. How much water do you think there is in here?"

"There is gauge by the pump switch. It read half."

"Half of what?"

His father shrugged.

"Couldn't be much, could it?"

"No. But I do not know how to find out how much."

"If I cover myself better next time, I'll need less to clean myself up. But if we are here one day, two days--either the roof will collapse onto us or I won't be able to clean myself up at all. If keep showering, we'll run out of water to drink."

"There is water in campground, I think."

"Then I'll have to figure out how to get some in here, if we run out. Do you know where it is?"

"No," his father said.

They both stood there, frowning. Jim usually relied on his father to know solutions to problems, to make good decisions. Now they were both in the same boat, a leaky, sinking boat of ignorance. Jim realized

he probably knew a little more than his father, with school teaching him about volcanoes. Who would have guessed that some science-class video, which he thought his teacher put on only because he was too tired to teach that day, would have helped his family now?

"I think," Jim began cautiously, not wanting to infringe on his father's place as head of the family, "that tomorrow morning, we should try and leave. What do you think?"

Slowly, his father nodded. "I understand why. But the roads are slick. I think I will crash the car." He sounded frightened.

Jim felt the same but didn't let it show. He was used to hiding fear at school, where any show of weakness could get you beaten up. "We need chains. Like for snow," Jim said. "I wonder if they have any."

"Maybe," his father said, hope creeping into his voice. "There are outside storage places on the trailer. We need the key, maybe, to open."

"Good. Let's tear this place apart looking for a key. Or for anything else that might help us. And next time I go out to clear the roof, I'll get into every one of those storage places and see what's inside them. If not tire chains, maybe something else to help."

They were the only ones in the campground. The ash made them impossible to spot from the air or the road. Their supplies were limited. They needed all the help they could get, Jim thought, but it wasn't coming. They'd have to find a way to help themselves.

3:30. Northwest flank.

The road was washed out. Trees had slid down the slope, blocking their way.

Norio said, "Can we set down the stretcher?" His back was aching, his legs were aching, and the backpack full of gas testing equipment seemed to grow heavier with each mile.

The woman gave a count to lower the stretcher, and they all set the pilot down. Norio went to the edge of the intact road and looked upslope and down. "What has happened," he said, "is that the ash is melting the glaciers, and there are streams of muddy water coming down. That's what took out the trees." He said it loudly enough to communicate with Akroyd. He had to talk loudly to the man; his hearing was damaged by the blast. It seemed curious that Akroyd had hearing problems but Norio and the pilot did not. Akroyd must have had his head turned just the wrong way. Or had his mouth tightly shut, perhaps, creating a pressure seal.

"You think this morning's big lahar will mean the post-eruption lahars are less dangerous?" Akroyd said.

"No. Maybe 10% less on this side of the mountain, because some of the ice has already melted, but not enough less to matter. It only means there was one extra this morning."

"Stupid volcano," said the woman.

"I like this volcano," Norio said, feeling offended.

"I'd like it plenty on television news and from half a world away," she snapped.

Ty broke in, "How's the water, everyone?" Their first rest stop, he had shown them how much water the two hikers had. They shared out bottles to Norio and Akroyd. It came out to twenty ounces each. The woman gave the pilot a sip from hers. They all eyed their water bottles, comparing the level of water to the progress they had made. Norio suspected everyone else knew, too, that water was going to be a problem before the end of the day. Carrying the stretcher was a sweaty chore. He decided he could live without a drink right now. Next stop, maybe, he'd take a sip.

"We could run into a house soon," the woman said.

"Only if we keep to the road," Ty said.

"What?" said Akroyd. "Speak up."

"There's not an option of sticking to the road," said Norio in a louder voice. "We have to skirt around this. And sooner, not later."

They all stretched first, working out kinks in their muscles, and

then each took his corner of the stretcher and heaved the pilot up. They turned right, into the trees.

Their pace went from slow to snail. The footing was bad, the ground damp. A thick patch of wild blackberry bushes blocked their way once, and they had to back up and detour around it. They made perhaps a fifth of the distance in this hour that they had made in the first hour. The pilot's face went white with strain as he was jostled around more.

After another hour of struggle, they reached a meadow, still alive with wildflowers. Not ash nor lahar nor *nuee ardente* had touched it. Ty called another rest and they set down the stretcher.

"Maybe you should leave me here," said the pilot.

"No," said the woman. "We all go together."

Ty said, "I can see you're hurting. I wish we could make it easier for you somehow."

"Leave me," the pilot said, "and make good time going down. That'll make it easier."

"It isn't safe to stay," said Norio. He'd like no burden, would prefer to run down the slope alone. But he couldn't in good conscience do that without giving the pilot full information. He felt tied to these four as if with chains, but he couldn't use duplicity to release himself of the burden. Nothing was more important than truth, finding it, publishing it, or even just saying it. "There could be a secondary eruption."

"What's that mean?" the woman asked. "There was a second one, right?"

He said, "No, like with Vesuvius. What happens is, the upper magma is less mafic, but once it's gone, then you get down to the really powerful stuff."

"You mean, it will get worse?" asked the pilot.

Akroyd said, "It could."

"What's 'mafic?'" asked the woman.

"Acidic," said Norio. "The magma beneath the first wave has more volatiles."

"More unstable and explosive," said Akroyd. "And possibly generates more pyroclastic clouds, like the one that just missed getting you two."

Ty stood. "Then we need to get going, quit resting so often. Get off the mountain."

Norio stifled a protest. The man was right. The sooner they got down, the safer they and the data would be. The sooner they got down, the sooner CVO would have his video, the sooner he could get in the lab and download the gas data.

A half hour of hiking later, Akroyd said, "Stop. Everybody stop."

"What?" said Norio, irritated. They'd never get down the mountain

at this rate. Still, it was a relief to set down the stretcher for a moment. He rubbed at his left shoulder. His left hand burned as blood flowed back in.

"Don't you smell it?" said Akroyd. "Smoke."

The woman shook her head but Ty, his nose lifted like a retriever's, said, "Yeah. I do."

"Maybe it's a wood fire?" said the woman hopefully. "A house nearby?"

"I hope," said the pilot.

"I bet it's a fire, a wildfire" said Akroyd. "Started by the pyroclasts."

"So it's probably to the south of us," Norio said. He still couldn't smell anything, which irked him. If it were only Akroyd saying so, he'd question the man's senses, but since the hiker had agreed, Norio was inclined to believe two of them. "Since we're going cross-country anyway, let's cut due north for a while," he said. "And fast as we can."

They switched places and picked up the stretcher again, aiming more toward the north. Norio had passed his dedicated GPS unit to the pilot who navigated for them from his supine position. The natural inclination was to find valleys to follow down, and Norio had to keep reminding them of the danger of that. Valleys were where the danger of lahars and *nuee aredente* were the highest. The footing was more reliable on higher ground anyway. They struggled along ridges with their burden. Norio caught a whiff of burning wood. It gave him new strength. "Let's hurry," he said.

Ellen caught the note of fear in Norio's voice. He must have finally smelled the smoke, too. The damned trees were so dense, a fire could be chasing them from less than a quarter mile away, and they'd not know it until it was right on them. A waft of smoke in the air would be indistinguishable from a bit of drifting ash.

Ty, bless the man, called another halt. "We can't go on forever. And maybe I can get up there--see that little rise?--and get some sort of view on things, look for that fire."

Ellen hated to see him split apart from the group, but she bit her lip against saying so and let him go. When he was out of sight in the trees, she said something that had been weighing on her mind for over an hour now. "We need to lighten this load."

"How?" said Norio.

"The instruments you guys are carrying. Leave them here. Come back for them later."

"No way," said Norio.

"Look," she said. "I can see the size of that thing you took off the helicopter. You must both be aching from schlepping that. And, here." She began pulling out the clothes she had tucked along the side of Corey. "My and Ty's things. We'll leave them, too."

"You should layer what clothes you have, and we should all put on any extras," said Akroyd. "I mean, if you don't mind sharing what you don't need. It's after five. It's going to get cold tonight."

Night. Cripes. Let them not still be out at night. But the idea of that firmed her resolve. "Good idea. Everything else, everything not useful for first aid or warmth, we need to let go."

"There's a lot of important data in here," said Norio, taking a step back, as if she might rip the backpack off him.

"There's a man's life at stake here," she said. "No, strike that. Five lives are at stake, including yours."

"Everything we learn about volcanoes can save thousands of lives down the road. Every bit of this information is precious."

Irritating man. "So is every person here. Lives saved on down the road? That's a maybe. That's one day. This is now and here. We five need to get off this mountain."

"There's a full moon tonight," said Akroyd, "or nearly full. But with the ash and the mountain blocking it, it's probably not going to help us see until midnight or after."

"I'm not leaving this equipment, lady," said Norio.

"You don't know my name yet? You've heard it a dozen times. Ellen!"

"I don't care about being sociable. All I care about is getting this data back to Vancouver."

"All I care about is surviving, so we have something of a problem, don't we?"

Akroyd surprised her by starting in on Norio, too. "It's not such a big deal to leave the instruments here. C'mon. If they do get lost in a fire or eruption, Kate isn't going to care. She's going to care that we're okay. Instruments can be replaced. People can't."

"Data is forever," said Norio. "People aren't."

Ellen had an idea. "Hey. Ty told me about how easy it is to ping a cell phone. So if you have a phone, you can leave it with your stuff, and you'll be able to find your way back to it."

Norio sputtered, obviously too offended at the idea to speak.

Corey weighed in. "Naw, we'll just take a GPS reading where it gets left. Totally easy to find it then."

"Better idea," said Ellen, eying Norio warily. The man sure knew how to get a huff on. He reminded her of a middle school student caught breaking rules, and indignant about being caught.

Norio walked off, muttering about relieving himself. She turned her full attention back to the pilot. "Thanks again."

"Glad I'm useful for something."

"You got us out of the danger zone," she said. "To me, you're more than useful. You're my savior."

"I'm the weight you should jettison, not the instruments."

Ellen shook her head. "You didn't abandon us. We won't abandon you." She studied the pilot's face. It was pale and strained. "You look pretty bad. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Want water?"

"No. I'm a little queasy."

Ellen felt for the guy. In pain, getting jostled around with every step. She'd feel sick too.

While she had been focusing on the pilot, Norio and Akroyd had joined up again, a few steps away. Akroyd continued to work away at Norio. Good. Ellen was losing patience with the man, and she didn't trust herself to say much more.

She pulled the sleeping bag off the pilot and began tossing socks and underwear and dirty T-shirts overboard. The zippered container with toiletries and the unused condom--stupid me not to use it while I had the chance, she thought again. Hair brush. She should have done this at first. Wasn't thinking clearly. Something about a volcanic eruption and a helicopter crash seemed to have muddled her brain. Imagine that.

Not hesitating to go through Ty's things too, she set aside a

sweatshirt of his and her jacket to keep. Akroyd and Ty were close in size. She'd have to offer up one of her extra layers to Norio, who was smaller, and he was pissing her off enough that she wasn't in the mood to do it right now. Ty had a flannel shirt, which she added to the pile. She'd wait for Ty and let him hand it over to Akroyd.

And she didn't much want to pull heavier clothes on over the crust of ash that still coated her arms, not until she had to. No way they could afford to use water for more washing. She and Ty had washed their faces and she had been able to brush some of it out of her hair after the helicopter had crashed, but not all. It had dried into a helmet of filth. She'd probably have to shave herself bald when this was over. That'd be attractive.

No, not "when this was over," she reminded herself, but "if she survived," which wasn't certain. Come to think of it, baldness wouldn't be so bad, would it? Not when compared to deadness.

One way to increase the odds of survival was to quicken their pace, if only the tiniest bit. Maybe a lighter load would make up for how exhaustion was slowing them as the day wore on. No one had said it aloud, but surely they all noticed, as she did. They'd been crawling along for this past hour. At this rate....

She imagined having to stay out all night, with insufficient warmth, five of them huddled together under two sleeping bags on the forest floor. And then another day of hiking, with no water left, no food to fuel them. What if the mountain erupted harder as it got down to that nastier magma the scientists had talked about? Damn it, no. They couldn't risk that. They needed to get off this mountain tonight, no matter what it took.

Ty came trotting back, twigs snapping under his feet. "I can see a line of smoke to the south, but it's a few miles away. Winds are still northwesterly. I think we should be safe from the fire if the winds don't shift."

She breathed a sigh of relief. "We're getting rid of extra weight." Akroyd and Norio were still speaking together a few steps off. "There's your flannel shirt--thought you might want to offer it to Akroyd and keep your sweatshirt."

"Good idea." He lifted her chin with a gentle finger so he could study her face. "You holding up okay?"

"Wish I were more acclimated to the altitude. I'm probably slowing us all down."

"Nope. None of us is a weak link. It's not like long legs matter in this cross-country hiking."

"You want to help Akroyd convince Norio to dump the equipment? I may be doing more harm than good by harping on him."

"Let him come to it on his own. Looks like Akroyd can wear him

down."

She pitched her voice lower. "I'm so tired, Ty."

"I know. If it makes you feel any better, I am too."

"I feel like my arms are both six inches longer than they were this morning." Even with four bearers sharing the load, the weight of her corner of the stretcher must have been over fifty pounds.

"We'll get down. And this day will end."

"As long as it doesn't end by our dying."

"It won't."

"And you know this how?"

"I have a feeling. Don't worry."

She opened her mouth to say something smart, but stopped herself. Why not take it as the comfort it was intended to be? "Okay," she said.

He grinned at her. "You were about to say...?"

"That you're very kind, and your optimism is heartwarming, and I fear I'm being something of a bitch."

"You're terrific." He ducked his head down and said softly, "Just to let you know, I'd kiss you hard right now to emphasize the point if I weren't covered in this stuff."

"Yeah, it'd sort of be like kissing sandpaper. Bad-tempered sandpaper."

"You never lose your sense of humor, do you?"

"Usually, the more stress I'm under, the more it comes out, and in nasty little points, too. I'm biting my tongue all the time right now against the urge." She looked over to the two scientists who were finally shedding, thank all the gods, the backpacks. "We'd better get going again soon."

"I'm not giving up my cell phone," said Norio, petulantly, as she and Ty watched him.

Ellen tried to make peace. "I wouldn't want you to. One of these days, we'll get a signal, and I want you all to have your cell phones ready to call for help."

"Not because of that. Because I have great video on here," he said.

"Sure, that too." Screw his great video and the chip it rode in on.

"Let's get going. Which way did you see the smoke?" she asked Ty.

He pointed, and they moved out in the opposite direction.

Camas, Washington. 2:20 p.m.

Chad and Francie were slogging through mud again. If he never got muddy again the rest of his life, it'd be too soon. His feet were numb from the cold. And his Achilles was definitely hurting again, and if it weren't submerged in cold mud, he knew it would hurt much worse. He tried not to think of that or what it meant for the future. Today was more important. They had little time to evacuate the area, barely over a hundred minutes estimated to the next wave of mud, with a dozen long streets to cover.

They split up, each taking one side of the street, and pounded on doors, yelling their warning. More than half the houses were empty, but there were people still home some of those did not want to leave. About a third of them had found a battery-operated device and already knew they should evacuate. Chad convinced a very few it was the best idea. It was easier to convince those with internet news on--they could see the extent of the disaster. Others stubbornly said they'd stay home. It worried him.

"Forget about it," said Francie. "They may come to their senses on their own, or we might have time to come back to them, or maybe they have enough food and water. But first, get everybody one warning, one chance."

That did seem fair. So they kept going, house after house, block after block, the minutes until the next lahar wave ticking off. They were approaching the river again. Or rather, Chad thought, the old river course, the streets closest to where it had been at dawn this morning. The river was everywhere now. Chad was about to leave the front stoop of another empty house when he heard the voice calling.

He held his breath, listened harder. A high, thin voice. Where was it coming from? Inside? No. He trotted down the steps and sloshed around the side of the house. The voice got louder. He was on the right track.

"Help me. Somebody, please."

He walked as fast as he could, skidding his way into the back yard. A fallen cedar fence led to another back yard on the next street over. In that yard, a detached garage had partly collapsed.

"Somebody over there?" he called.

"Yes. I'm here. Help me!" The voice came from the collapsed garage.

He clambered over the fallen fence then slid down the angle on muddy shoes until he was standing in the mud of a back yard.

"Chad!" Francie, back behind him on the street still. "Damn it, where are you?"

He shouted as loudly as he could. "I'm here! Behind the green house. Francie. Come on back."

The garage had partly collapsed onto a woman--from her voice, someone around his mother's age. Half of a wall pinned her lower body, which was invisible under the mud. She was muddy everywhere but from her eyes up to crown of her head. At one point, from the looks of it, she must have been straining to keep her nose far enough out of the mud to breathe. The remains of the lahar had receded to below her chest now. He slid over to her. "Ma'am, I'm Chad Keppler. Camas Fire. We'll get you out."

"Thank God you're here," she said, and then she broke down weeping.

He touched her shoulder. She was distinctly cold to the touch, probably hypothermic, though not shivering--a bad sign, if shivering had come and gone. "You did great saving yourself," he said. "Looks like your head was almost underwater."

She nodded. "I was so sc-scared," she managed through her sobs.

He could hear the downed fence snap and glanced around. Francie was sliding down toward them. Good. She'd know what to do.

She grabbed his arm and spoke low. "Don't ever do that again. Stay in sight, or tell me where you're going."

"I'm sorry." She was right.

Francie knelt in the mud by the woman and started examining her. "Can you move your feet at all?"

"I think so. I can't really tell for sure. They're numb, still."

"Do you think you hurt your neck or back?" She examined the woman's neck as she asked.

"I don't think so, no." The trapped woman was starting to calm. It must have been awful being trapped here alone.

"Give me some water," Francie said to Chad.

She washed the woman's neck and face then took a closer look around her neck and ears. "Everything seems okay, but I hate moving you without a neck brace and proper equipment." Francie glanced at her watch.

Chad had to clean his own watch on his shirt to see it. They had under an hour to free the woman and finish evacuating their area. "Should we call someone else to help?"

Francie bit her lip. "Everyone else is busy, too. We're so far into the mud, so close to the river, I'm afraid it'd take too long to get equipment down here. God, I'd love a rescue jack and winch, though. Let's just try to get it done ourselves."

She crawled around the collapsed wall, peering under the edge

that jutted out of the mud. When she stood, the expression on her face was not a happy one. "Well," she said, the uncertainty clear in her tone, "let's see if you and I can lift it far enough for her to push herself out."

They stood on either side of the woman's legs. Francie bent low and Chad mirrored her. He gripped the rough board edges and nodded to her that he was ready.

"Okay," Francie said to the woman. "If you feel any relief of the weight at all, try and scramble back. Push with your arms, not your legs." She glanced at Chad to make sure he was ready. "On three. One. Two. *Three*."

Chad dug in and pushed with every muscle he could call on. His arms, his shoulders, his back, his thighs. Pushed and pushed, feeling the pain in his Achilles sharpen. His feet slid out from under him and he fell forward, cracking his jaw on the edge of the garage wall. Quickly, he rolled away from it, not wanting to put any more weight on the woman.

"It didn't move," she said. "I'm sorry, but it didn't move at all." Her voice rose towards hysteria again.

"It's okay. It was a long shot, but we had to try," said Francie, bent over, her hands braced on her thighs. Chad could see her breathing hard.

He scrambled to his feet, resisting the urge to grab onto the garage wall to get upright. He was starting to really hate this slippery mud. "Maybe I can try lifting again and you can pull her."

Francie was shaking her head before he was done. "No, we shouldn't have even tried that. This is not *light* search and rescue, and that's our assignment." She glanced at her watch. "We can try and crib the wall, break up that fence for the posts. But I don't see anything sturdy enough for fulcrum or lever. And I hate taking time to search for it."

Chad agreed. Time was wasting.

Francie said, "Ma'am, do you have a car here? With a jack in the trunk?"

"Yes. In front of the house."

"Keys?"

"They're--wait." Her hand disappeared under the mud, and she came out with a round glob of mud that must have been the keys. "Here."

Chad took them from her, shook off mud and wiped them on his shirt.

"You go find her car, get the jack. While you're gone, I'll call to see if there's a better-equipped rescue team available," said Francie, pulling out her radio.

He went around to the front of her house and saw no car. Further up the street, away from the river, three cars sat, twisted every which way by the initial push of the lahar. He tried the panic button on the electronic key, but nothing lit up. He went up and tried the key in one trunk with no success. Should have asked her what she drove. Her car might have been driven farther than this by the push of the lahar. But the second trunk yielded to the muddy key. He pushed aside a bunch of junk she had piled in there and tore out the liner to get to the spare tire. Twisting off the wing nuts that held it down, he got to the scissor jack. There was a tire iron too. Hell, the tire itself might be good for cribbing. Slamming the trunk, he put the keys into his pocket and hauled everything back, struggling with the weight in the mud.

When he got there, Francie was sitting in the mud, pushing at something under the fallen wall with her legs. Her hands were braced on something else that he couldn't see. Working with anything under the mud was working blind. He dropped the tire, set the tire iron to the side, and checked his watch again. Time was burning. "Okay, where do you want the jack?"

"Can you shove that tire underneath the wall on your side?"

Chad reached into the mud to measure the space with his hands. "No way."

"Okay, try the jack, then. Put it as close to her as you can for leverage, but not so close that if it slips it'll hurt her." Francie stood up and wiped her hands on the rear of her uniform pants, which were as muddy as her hands.

He put the jack about four feet from the woman and tried to pump it up. It did not want to stay in place. The slippery mud was making everything far more complicated than it should be, and the minutes ticking away made it crucial that he not waste any one of them.

He stood on the lip of the jack to keep it in place and tried again. A little better, but he felt like he was about two seconds from slipping off it and sprawling onto the woman. He gave a worried look to Francie.

"Keep going," she said. Her tone echoed his own concern--they shouldn't be doing this with poor equipment, and they should be moving faster, but what else could they do?

Pumping the handle, he started feeling some resistance. If he could keep it there long enough to get some of the weight of the wall on it, maybe the base of the jack would get driven past the mud and contact the ground. Just as he thought this, the jack slipped, sliding out from the fallen wall. The suddenness sent him off balance, too, and onto his rear end. Sitting in the mud, he set his teeth in frustration. He got back up.

Letting the jack down a few inches, he pushed it back and began

pumping again, one foot on the jack base, one back from it to brace himself the best he could in this awful footing. Again, he felt the weight of the wall start to resist him. He got one good stroke on the jack, two. Maybe it was starting to move. Again, the jack slipped out, this time clipping him in the shin. Ouch. "Time?" he said.

"Keep going," was all Francie said.

The thought of the coming lahar made Chad feel desperate. "You want to try?"

"I couldn't do any better."

He focused his energy--all his will--on getting this jack to do the job. Teeth clamped stubbornly, he positioned the jack again and started pumping. When he felt resistance, he slowed down. He braced himself. One hard pump. Another.

"It's moving," said the woman. "I can feel it!"

"Get ready to help me get you out," Francie said to her.

Holding his breath, Chad gave the jack handle another slow pump.

"One more," said Francie.

Chad lifted and pressed down on the metal handle, gripping it firm and steady. The wall made a sucking sound as it cleared the mud another fraction of an inch.

Francie grunted with effort behind him. He focused solely on the jack, on his job of not letting it slide out, and he trusted Francie to do hers.

He heard the woman make a sound, a laugh almost.

Francie said, "We have her, Chad. Hang tight one second more, let me make sure she's clear."

He stood his ground, not pumping, not turning his head to see their success, but just bracing the jack. The wall was still lifting on its own as it fought free of the glue of the mud. In another two seconds, Francie said, "Okay," and Chad jumped back. The wall sank down as the jack slid out. He turned and saw the woman sitting up, free of the fallen wall, Francie checking her over as best she could. With the mud, it was impossible to assess physical damage very accurately. Typically, Francie would be patting her for broken bones and looking at her own hands to see if there were any blood transferred to them. All she'd see today was mud.

He glanced at his watch. Not that they had much time for first aid if she found a problem. "We're down to under thirty minutes," he said.

"I hate to do this, but we're going to have to move you now," Francie told the woman. "There's another lahar--another wave of mud--coming."

"Oh my God, you mean if you hadn't gotten me out...?" She trailed off.

"Everything is okay now," Chad said.

"Can you walk?" said Francie.

"You can't carry me," said the woman, struggling to stand. She gave a cry of pain and slid back down into the mud, Francie helping ease her down.

"We can carry you," said Chad. "And we will."

"Just get me into my house, onto the sofa."

"No," said Francie. "We'll get you out of here. You need to have those legs seen to, get some X-rays. Don't worry." She looked up at Chad and, even through the mud covering her face, he could see she was anxious.

He wondered what she was seeing that he wasn't, but he couldn't ask her what it was in front of the victim. "Guess everyone else will have to evacuate themselves."

Francie said, "Run inside her house and find a lightweight chair. We'll try to carry her in that. Or get a blanket. No, both."

"There's an afghan on the back of the sofa," the woman said. "And the back door is unlocked."

"Great," said Chad, taking off through the mud. Inside the house he found the afghan and slid it around his shoulders. The kitchen chairs weren't right--they were some sleek design without any good place to hang onto. He sped through the rooms of the first floor and found an office, with a small wooden chair in the corner, maybe an antique. It was lightweight and had a ladder back, arms, and plenty of places to grip--perfect. He took it and ran out the back door. Skating his way through the mud to the women, he said, "Got it."

They decided Chad would start at the rear position, holding the back of the chair, the heavier part, and Francie would walk with a bottom dowel of the chair legs gripped in her hands behind her back. Chad gave the woman the afghan and told her to hang on tight to it--always give the victim something to do, that was the rule for a carry of a conscious person. On three, they lifted the woman into the chair. They lifted that, found their balance then carried her around to the front of her house and started up the muddy street.

Twice in two blocks they had to set her down to rest. Twice Chad looked at his watch in increasing worry while Francie screamed out the evacuation warning to anyone who could hear and shook out her arms. At this rate, they would be racing the lahar to the edge of the flood zone. Maybe this second one wouldn't come up as far. He would hope.

Every muscle on Chad hurt when they picked up the injured woman again. His hands hurt. His thighs burned with the effort. His shin throbbed where the jack had hit it. He tried not to think about his painful Achilles.

The third time they stopped to rest, Francie said, "We could use

some help. Let me see if there's anyone close now." She walked away several steps to talk into the radio. She probably didn't want to worry the woman with what she was saying.

Chad was worried too. Some part of him wanted to give up, to get himself out of the way of the next lahar, to go curl up somewhere and baby his own injuries. But it was a small part of him, easily dismissed. They could and they would get the woman to safety.

When Francie came back, she shook her head--no help coming--and motioned for him to take the chair again. He bent his knees and lifted. Each time he lifted her, the weight seemed greater. She wasn't a big woman, and the chair wasn't heavy, but the sticky mud was reluctant to let go and his fatigue and pain was making it harder each time to lift her clear.

More precious minutes ticked off as they carried the woman another block. His wrecked Achilles kept sending him pain signals to stop, already. He couldn't stop. He wouldn't stop. He had to do one useful thing today.

"I have to rest again," said Francie.

"Let's keep going," Chad said. "Force it."

"I'm sorry," Francie said. "I can't. I need to at least change my grip."

"Let's figure out a way to have me take more of the weight then," Chad said, reluctantly putting down the chair again.

Francie said, "You're already taking more than your share. Maybe we should try switching sides." She swiped the back of her hand across her face, leaving another fresh streak of mud.

The woman said, "I wish I could help somehow."

Chad managed a smile for her. "No ma'am, you don't need to do a thing. You aren't wriggling around or making it harder, so don't fret. You're doing your job perfect already." He glanced at his watch.

"Seven minutes. That what you have?"

"Seven minutes?" the woman asked.

Chad exchanged a glance with Francie, who took a breath and said, "The next lahar. Coming down the Sandy again right now, probably passing Gresham as we speak."

"Oh my god."

"We're several blocks from the riverfront now, so we won't get the worst of it."

"Should we just get up onto something?" Chad asked, checking his watch again. They couldn't make it much further in that little time.

Francie blew out a frustrated breath. "Yes." Again, she called out an evacuation warning to anyone in the houses around them. Last chance, people. If you don't leave now, it'll be a while before you can.

They struggled to pick up the chair one last time and headed toward a house that had three concrete steps leading up to a sizeable

landing. Chad was trying to lift the chair high enough to clear a buried first step when the woman said, "Oh, no. Look."

Chad turned his head to look and saw the thing coming. Lighter gray than the mud that covered the street, it rolled in like an ocean wave far out from land, not breaking like surf, but a distinct high swell of mud. He could hear the thudding sound of mud-covered debris hitting trees and houses a half-block away. Crap. "Set her down," he said to Francie. He bent, grabbed the woman under the knees and under an arm and said, "Hold on to me." When she hesitated, he said, "Grab me around the neck." Finally, she did, and he managed to lift her out of the chair. Forcing his knees to bend under the doubled weight, he got her up the stairs and said, "Hold on to something. It might not get to us up here on the stoop, but hang on just in case." He lowered her to the stoop, his back straining as he bent the last couple feet to set her down.

Francie was backing up the steps, pulling the chair up behind her when the lahar caught up to them. The front edge of the lahar passed by her, climbed up one, two, three steps in a heartbeat. Francie, still on the first step, staggered and grabbed for the delicate wrought iron railing. Chad reached around her to snatch up the chair before it could be spun away by the flood.

A two-inch-thick chunk of attached boards lifted out of the mud like a breaching whale and slammed into Francie. Her fingers were torn from the railing. She flipped over backwards into the mud, the boards crashing onto her with a sickening thud.

All this happened in less time than it took to blink. Chad again said to the woman, "Hang on."

In a single leap, he cleared the steps and plunged into the cold, churning mud, screaming for Francie. He couldn't see her anywhere. His eyes couldn't pick her out of the other debris swirling in the mudflow. "Francie!" he screamed again. Then a mud-coated hand lifted, only six or eight feet from him and his eyes resolved her form, her face, which still bobbed above the surface.

The flow of the mud tugged at him like a rip current, but he fought it. Step by step, he battled across the flow. The lahar pulled Francie away from him. He pushed harder, closing the distance. He touched her hand. They grabbed each other's wrists and he hung on, bracing himself against the current.

Pulling for all he was worth, he was able to lift her further up, and her feet found purchase. As she got her feet under her, the strain on his arm eased.

"Don't let go of me," she said.

"I won't." The flood kept coming, wild and strong. He felt something thud off the back of his legs. He took the blow and stood

firm. "We need to get out of the way of this debris," he said.

She nodded and he backed up toward the house, tugging her along. She was able to stand, but the force of the lahar kept lifting her lighter mass and he had to grab on hard to keep it from wrenching her away. Through sheer will, he got them back to the porch, behind the first step, the second. As he got behind the third step, he felt the power of the current lessen. A slow whirlpool spun in the corner he was aiming for. He pulled Francie until they both were behind the porch, tucked into the corner and as protected as they could be. He could feel Francie shivering. Only then did he realize how icy cold the fresh mud was.

He caught the woman's eyes up on the stoop. "Are you okay?" he asked her.

"I'm fine. Are you both okay?"

"I'm hurt," said Francie. "That thing really got me in the gut, and I felt nails in it. I think I'm bleeding." The mud in their corner reached her hips, and neither of them could tell if there was blood on her. Every bit of her but her head was covered with gray goo, like wet mortar.

"I'll lift you onto the porch in a minute. Then you can rest."

"I don't think I can help you much," she said. "I'm weak as hell."

"Maybe you can slip between the rails there." She was a slim woman.

She felt the space then shook her head. "Not hardly. Just don't let me float away, okay?"

"Wrap your arm around one of those rails." He did the same, hoping they were set firmly in the concrete of the stoop. The swirling mud still pulled at his legs. It reached nearly his hips now. It was to Francie's waist. As he braced against the current, he thought of her open wounds, dirty nail wounds, and bacteria seeping in. She must be really hurt; she was a tough woman, but she was struggling now just to hold on. He reached around her with his free arm, grabbing a second railing, and caging her in against the porch.

The woman on the porch with the injured legs was in more dire need. He knew--and he knew Francie knew--that crush injuries could very quickly become life-threatening, even if the patient seemed fine for now. Her blood chemistry was out of whack, and getting worse. Either her heart or kidneys could shut down at any time. He had to manage somehow, on his own, to get them both out of here and to medical treatment, and now.

But until the current slowed, he couldn't do a danged thing.

"The radio!" he said. "Where's the radio?"

"On my waist. Under the mud now, I'm afraid."

So he couldn't call for help. It was really all on him. And his wrists

hurt, his thighs ached, and his Achilles was screaming in pain. He'd probably limp for life. But it didn't matter, not if he could still manage to get the two injured women to help in time.

"Ma'am," he said to the woman. "I never did ask your name. I'm sorry. That was rude."

Both she and Francie laughed, but he couldn't see why. The woman said, "I'm Alice Gilcrease."

Chad introduced himself and Francie. "We'll get you out, Ms. Gilcrease, don't worry. We're all safe for now."

He watched the mudflow, still speeding inland, carrying its load of debris.

"There goes my car," said the woman, and they watched while it drifted up the street past them.

Francie told Ms. Gilcrease about the volcano erupting while they waited out the lahar. While the two women talked, Chad tried to think. The inflow was easing off, he thought. The mud had reached a new high, covering the walls at least a foot higher than the first lahar. Probably there'd be an outflow next, a different current to fight, but he bet it would be much less forceful--at least this morning it had been. Within a few minutes, he thought he'd be able to navigate through it without becoming a casualty himself.

Those minutes ticked by too slowly. The afternoon was wearing on. He had to get them out of here before dusk, no matter what, but the sooner the better. He tried to decide. Should he carry one of them out with him? Or go get help first? He'd move four times quicker alone.

His plan clear in his mind, he told it to the women. "I'm going to go get help. You two sit tight and I'll be back as soon as I can. I'll get you up to the porch first, Francie."

She shook her head. "I'm fine here. I can stand, but I'm afraid I'm too hurt to walk through this. Just go."

"No. You need to get up there, Francie and lie down. What if you go into shock?"

"Shit," she said. "You're right."

"I know I am." He grabbed her under the armpits and, when she let go, he backed around the porch and up the mud-covered stairs. It was much like dragging the dummy in the physical firefighter test, but he didn't have to pretend he cared this time. It was Francie, his partner, and he did care. He'd do whatever it took to help her. He said, "Wrap that blanket around your shoulders, and you feel faint or spacey, you lie down, get your feet up."

"I'll be fine," she said, but the faintness of her voice said otherwise. She unclipped the mud-covered radio from her belt and offered it to him.

Chad wasn't surprised when it didn't work. He squeezed her muddy hand in farewell. Then he turned and strode through the mud. It was like it had been this morning, hard work to stride through it, but harder with the mud being higher and resisting him more. Only eight or nine hours ago this had started, was that possible? He felt he'd lived years in this one day.

Under the sloshing mud, there was a thicker layer from this morning's lahar, denser, and the surface between the two was distinct and slippery. The asphalt under that may as well been a mile down, for all he could feel it. He pushed through the mud, block after block, hurrying uphill as fast as his muscles and the mud would allow him to move, powering past debris he felt hit his legs, ignoring everything but his goal.

Cars were overturned or pinned against the walls of houses. At least no bodies this time, none that he could see. He couldn't spare time to do anything about it if he found one. He had to get help for the living first.

The mud was below knee level now, the level dropping off quickly as he approached the edge of the disaster area where the ground started to rise. Finally, he hit clear sidewalk. He bent over, rested muddy hands on muddy thighs and caught his breath. But only for a few seconds. He had to find an ambulance.

He forced himself to a jog, running down the block with splatting sounds as his muddy feet hit pavement. He glanced up the cross street, ran another block. The mud was ahead of him again, so he cut down a side street away from it and saw a crowd of a dozen people on a street corner, most of them taking pictures. He forced himself to jog the rest of the way to them. Every time his weight came down on his bad Achilles, it hurt like blazes.

He called to the group ahead of him. "Chad Keppler. Camas Fire. Are your cell phones getting a signal?"

"No," said a man. "No one can get through. You okay?"

"I have two injured women back in the lahar. I need the fire engine or an ambulance. Have you seen one around here?"

The people in the crowd were all shaking their heads. The first man who had spoken said, "I'll help you get them out."

"I will too," said a woman.

Chad hated to do this. He had no authority to order volunteers into action. If one of them got injured, it would be his fault. "It'll be dangerous," he said.

"Been that kind of a day," the first man said, cheerfully. "Let's go."

Everyone but a father with a toddler in his arms offered to help. Chad asked the father and a young businesswoman in impractical shoes to go hunting for the fire engine or an ambulance. He gave them

the cross streets to meet them. At the last second he remembered. "Tell them a firefighter is injured." That'd assure quick response. He led his volunteer rescuers back to where he'd exited the mud.

"Last chance to back out," he said to his volunteers, before stepping back in. "I won't think less of any of you if you do."

No one did. So he led them into the mud and they waded back towards where he'd left Francie and Ms. Gilcrease. As he led them, the phrase "blind leading the blind" kept running through his mind, and he couldn't shake it off. He'd prefer to have someone official to give the orders, but he was all there was.

They made it all the way to the women without anyone getting injured, and Chad heaved a sigh of relief at that. He had his volunteers organized into teams in no time. Once he showed them how to roll its edges to provide handles, the muddy afghan worked well enough as a stretcher with four to carry Francie. The chair also had four people to share the burden now. With so many to help, they moved faster than Francie and he had carrying the woman, despite the higher level of mud. Whenever someone slipped, three others compensated to make sure neither woman got dropped, though one of his volunteers did get coated in mud up to his chest on one fall.

Chad could see the ambulance ahead now, its lights flashing in the light of early evening. He'd never been so happy to see emergency lights in his life.

"Francie, they're there, waiting for us," he said. "You'll both be in EMT care in a few minutes."

The EMTs waited at the edge of the mud for the rescuers to come out. Chad handed over the injured women and backed off.

"I'll have them call in to the firehouse," Francie said, teeth chattering, as she was wheeled in to the back of the ambulance. "You're done for the day, partner. You did great."

He raised a hand in farewell, too tired to think of anything more to say to her. After the ambulance doors closed, he made sure to shake the muddy hands of each of his volunteers and tell them what a terrific thing they'd done. And then he stumbled away, alone.

He was wiped out. Part of him wanted to keep helping, but he knew he shouldn't. He couldn't. He was done in.

I'll shower tomorrow. I'll see about Francie tomorrow. I'll help more tomorrow. Right now, I'm dead on my feet.

Somehow, he managed to limp the ten blocks back to where he'd left his car. The little hill at the end seemed like Mount Hood itself. It was all he could do not to lie down on the sidewalk and take a nap before climbing it. But he pushed on until he saw his car. He realized he was welling up tears in relief at the sight of it. Stupid kid, he told himself. His keys were still at the bottom of his jeans pocket, tangled

up with Ms. Gilcrease's muddy keys. He'd get those back to her somehow tomorrow. He unlocked the car, slid his wet, muddy body into the back seat and, despite shivering, was asleep within seconds.

Northwest Flank.

Dusk deepened. Ellen felt the oncoming night as a whip, driving her faster. But the footing in the deepening gloom soon made going faster difficult. The effort of not tripping over invisible obstacles drained the last of her strength even more quickly. Her palms were scraped raw by holding the limbs that framed the stretcher. She could have wept with relief when they stumbled out onto another packed dirt forest road. They trundled on, exhausted, hungry, thirsty, but grateful for the surer footing.

Her blisters had their own blisters, and she could feel raw skin chafing against her hiking boots. She had bought them a month ago and broken them in with neighborhood walks back in Nebraska, but it hadn't been enough callus-building for this sort of endurance test.

Too soon the sky darkened to black, leaving the road too dark to hike safely. "Let's stop and eat," said Ty. "Finish what food we have."

"What?" said Akroyd. "Speak up, please."

Something else to worry about, the more pleasant scientist and his hearing. She remembered the booming explosions that signaled the start of the eruption and how her ears had rung. A half-mile closer, or standing on a ridge instead of in trees, and maybe she'd be deaf too. There but for the grace of God, as her grandfather used to say. Or think of poor Corey, the pilot, lying on the stretcher. While the others were dividing up the food and off in the woods relieving themselves, she knelt by him and said, "How you feeling?"

"Truth?"

"Of course."

"Not great."

She wished she could see his face better, but he was only a vague shape in the dusk, and a voice. "Leg hurting?"

"Some." His voice sounded strained, more strain than "some" pain might generate.

Akroyd brought over her share of the food.

"Here," she said to Corey, "have half the granola bar."

"Nah."

"Fair's fair. Everybody gets a bite." Though not much more than a bite.

"Can't," he said.

"Sure you can."

His hand groped out in the dark and found her arm. He gripped her ash-crustured flesh. "No. I mean--damn, I'm sorry, but I'm sick.

Really sick."

"From getting jostled around so much?"

"No. Maybe a little of it is that, but my side hurts like hell, and it feels hot to the touch. I think I may have some sort of internal injury."

Concern knifed through her. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"To what purpose?"

"Aw, jeez." She was worried for herself, for Ty, for them all, even for that irritating scientist Norio. And now most of all for Corey.

He said, "It started hurting maybe a half hour after the accident, after you all started carrying me."

"I wish I could help. Maybe someone else knows more about first aid than I do."

"I doubt it. None of you are medical professionals. Don't tell them."

"Of course I'm going to tell them," she snapped. "Damn. Sorry, I didn't mean to bark at you. But it's not the time for macho man stoicism. Maybe one of them knows what to do."

"I know what to do. Keep me quiet, unmoving, and call the ambulance." He snorted with amusement but it was cut off by a gasp of pain.

"Hey Ty," she called. "Do you have a cell signal yet?"

She saw the light of his phone going on. "Nope, sorry," he called. "How about you two?" Two more lights flicked on. They flicked off again a few seconds later in silence, the meaning clear. No cell signals.

"What luck. How many places do you think there's no cell service in the U.S?" she said to the pilot. "This must be the one place."

"Nah, there's a lot, I imagine. It's a big country. Lots of wilderness, still. Idaho, Montana, the southwest deserts, Colorado. Anywhere there are mountains." He made a soft sound of pain.

Her gut twisted in sympathy. "I have to tell them you're hurt," she said. "We need to figure out together what to do, here."

"Damn it," he said, but there was resignation in his voice.

She groped for his shoulder, gave it a pat, and got back up. She walked over to the others and said, "We have a new crisis."

"What's your problem now?" said Norio.

"It's not mine. Ours. Corey thinks he has internal injuries. He's in bad pain."

"What?" said Akroyd.

It seemed impolite to stand here and yell about the pilot in his hearing range. Either they should go over and talk with him, or keep their voices down. But Akroyd's hearing problem made subtlety and discretion not an option. All their other options sucked, too. Stay? Go on in the dark? Split up?

"Our pilot can't go any further, I'm afraid," she said, loud enough to include Akroyd. "He's injured worse than we knew. Maybe I should

stay here with him, and you guys should go down hill and send up help."

Ty was shaking his head before she had finished the sentence. "I won't leave you alone." He turned his phone back on to give them a bit of light to see each other as they talked.

"I'll stay with Corey. It's not like a gang of killers and rapists is going to come up toward the volcano, is it?"

"It's not people I'm worried about." Ty looked back up at the mountaintop, though the dusk had rendered its heights invisible.

"We stopped smelling smoke a long while ago. We're far enough down now to be safe from everything else, aren't we?" she looked to Akroyd.

He shook his head. "Don't look at a map of Pompeii and Vesuvius, not if you're looking for reassurance on that point. And we're still literally on the mountain. But even if we reach the river, we won't be safe."

Norio said, "And the river in particular won't be safe. Not navigable. It'll be flooded, full of mud, up over its banks. And that's despite closing down all the dams, as they probably have done. The highways along the banks may be under water. We shouldn't head that way."

"I don't think we can afford to worry about every what-if," Ellen said. "Maybe the volcano will erupt worse, maybe it won't. But Corey is not going any farther tonight."

"I'm right here," Corey called, sounding exasperated. "And I kind of need to piss, so if someone could help me."

Ty asked Akroyd to join him, and they went to help the pilot. Turning away, Ellen could hear them turn him, his gasp of pain. Then the sound of urine striking the ground. The sound of the other men moving the stretcher a few yards along the road, closer to her and Norio. Though he was only a couple feet away, she couldn't see Norio's face. Night had fallen.

"Damn," she said, as Ty and Akroyd joined them again. The thought had struck her belatedly. "You should have looked to see if he was peeing blood." She hadn't lowered her voice enough.

"What if I was?" said Corey. "Like that would change anything."

"Maybe you should quit drinking water," said Norio. "In case they have to operate on you, aren't you supposed to not drink water?"

"I don't know," said Ellen. "He shouldn't dehydrate on top of everything else." Her lack of knowledge about this was frustrating. If only she had a library, an Internet connection. Of course, if the smart phones could pick up a signal to get the Net, they'd pick up a signal for 911. "You could be right," she said to Norio. "I just don't know."

"So what do we do?" said Akroyd. "We're not going to make much

distance carrying the stretcher in the night."

"Hauling the stretcher is done," said the pilot. "Whatever you all do, you leave me here. I can't take any more jostling."

"Not alone," said Ellen. "I won't leave you alone."

"Yes," said the pilot, "Alone. Just go. All of you. Even in the dark, you can make a good pace without me."

"I should go back for the instruments," said Norio.

"Fuck your fucking instruments!" snapped Ellen. "They'll keep. He won't. You should go on and get help, is what you should do."

Ty said, "Right. You two go on down. With two, you can split up if you come to a fork in the road. Ellen and I will wait here with Corey."

"No," said Ellen. "You're fit, you're fast. You go too, Ty. Keep to the road, all three of you." If something else did go wrong and the mountain managed to kill her and the pilot, she wanted Ty to be well away.

"There's no reason for all three of us to go," Ty said. "One would be enough."

"Two might be better, in case one gets hurt," said Akroyd.

Ellen made sure her voice sounded strong and sensible. She had to convince Ty to get to safety. "Three would be better if the volcano does erupt again, if another one of those ash hurricane things comes roaring down this way. Better two of us dead than three of us." She couldn't bear the thought of Ty dying.

"They'll go," said Ty. "You and I will stay."

"All of you can go," said Corey from the darkness where he lay. "We take a GPS reading, you punch it into your phones, they'll know right where to find me."

"No," said Ellen. It was too easy to imagine herself as the injured person. She'd not want to be left alone, hurt and frightened, in the dark, though she'd try to be brave, too. "No way am I leaving you here."

"We need to shit or get off the pot," said Norio. "Time's burning."

"Maybe we *should* burn some time," said Ty. "Sit down, eat, drink water, rest for an hour. We'll be calmer with a little rest and it'll be easier to think. Or two hours, even. Take a nap until the moon comes out of the ash and lights the road."

"I think Norio's right," said Ellen. "Don't waste time." The pilot might not have two extra hours. "Please, Ty, go without me." She kept her voice quiet, trying to talk just to him.

He grasped her aching hands in his. "No, Ellen."

"Is it better we both die than only one of us?"

"That's assuming something else will go wrong with the volcano. If it doesn't, you'll hate me forever if I leave you here."

"No, I won't. Besides, if the volcano kills me tonight, it'd be a very

short period of hate."

"I'm. Not. Going," he said through gritted teeth, and his tone told her he really wouldn't. He raised his voice to include the scientists. "You two go on down. Take the GPS reading of where you leave us. We three will stay here. No more arguing. Let's just get it done."

The little bit of food--a few nuts and the apple, probably bruised badly by now--went with the hikers who would need the fuel more. The two scientists had cell phones, and they took the GPS unit with them, but Ty kept his own phone and said he'd turn it on again at dawn, in case it could help rescuers find them. Until then, he'd conserve the battery.

They shook hands with Akroyd. Norio had already moved off down the road.

Corey called, "Godspeed."

Ellen said, "Hurry."

Akroyd said, "We will."

When they moved beyond hearing range, Ty turned off his phone. They sat on the ground by the pilot's side. Ty put his arm around her. "It's going to get cold in a very short while, here."

"Take the sleeping bag," said the pilot.

"Nope, you need it more," said Ty.

"Take apart the stretcher, then. Put me in one bag and two of you take the other.

"Maybe in a while," said Ty. "We're fine for now. Good excuse to cuddle."

Corey said, "How long have you two been married?"

"We're not," said Ty, pulling Ellen closer.

"Well, people don't any more, I guess. They live together."

Ellen said, "We've been dating three days."

"No fooling?" Corey said. "Seems like you're a comfortable old couple. Huh. Hell of a way to start dating."

"Get all the drama out of the way at the beginning," said Ty. "Maybe we won't need to fight as much later on."

Corey chuckled, then gasped. "Ouch. Hurts to laugh."

Ellen said, "You should try and get some sleep anyway."

"We all should," said Ty. "I know I'm wiped out. I'm going to get some pine boughs to put down for bedding. The ground will be damned cold in a couple hours."

"But it's dark," Ellen said.

"Cell phone if I need a light," he reminded her.

"Be careful."

"You bet." He moved off into the dark.

Ellen missed his warmth. She sat silently next to Corey, unable to see him. But she could hear him; his breathing was getting ragged.

She was worried for him and angry she couldn't do anything to help. She wanted to reach out and take his hand, give him some human comfort, but she also wanted him to fall asleep if he could and escape his pain that way.

She could hear Ty as he gathered piles of downed boughs. He brought a load back and, while he went to get more, she stripped them down to get rid of the thickest sticks, piling up the softer bits into a nest. They worked for a long while at it. After some time, probably a half hour or more, there was enough for a pile the size of a man. She and Ty alone managed to lift Corey's stretcher far enough to set him on the nest. Ty went back to get more boughs for the two of them to sit on.

Sitting on the dirt road waiting, she was getting cold. The night was strangely silent, without normal sounds of owls or insects. Probably every creature with half a brain had left the mountain hours ago, which meant what about her own intelligence? She wondered if other people had been caught on the mountain. What about people at the lodge? Other hikers? Who had been burned to death, or crushed, or suffocated, or succumbed to gas? She wondered what the statistics would be on the morning news. She thought about how those statistics translated into grief and loneliness for hundreds more. People like Ty's parents and her mother.

She hoped desperately that Corey and she and Ty would not be counted among the dead, that her mother and friends would not be among the grieving.

She shivered, knowing that out there in the dark, somewhere beyond sight, the eruption still threatened.

Norio said, "I wish we could run." He wanted to get down and deal with this situation so that he could get back up and recover the instruments and start processing the data.

"Not enough light for running," said Akroyd.

He was right. The road had plenty of buried rocks and the occasional downed limb to trip them. Norio had already stumbled once. All they needed was for one of them to go down with a broken bone, too, and then where would they be?

They labored up a hill to another ridge. At the top, Norio stopped and looked around. The world in every direction was pitch black, which was good news, in a sense. Had there been harder erupting at this point, another *nuee ardente*, 1000 degrees Centigrade or more, would have radiated red or even yellow light, were it hot enough. No menace from the eruption was chasing them.

Though if pyroclasts had been racing toward them, they'd be as good as dead. Two surviving that in this eruption already was beating the odds.

Norio flipped on his cell phone again, then his radio. His radio crackled with faint static, for the first time in a while.

"Thank God," said Akroyd.

It wasn't nearly a strong enough signal to carry a message, but it was something, a sign they were making progress. "We need to get a little further. Next ridge, maybe."

They went on in the dark, making good time now that they weren't hauling the weight of the pilot.

"I wish I could call my wife," Akroyd said. "She must be going crazy by now."

Norio didn't know what to say to that. "How are your ears?" he said instead.

"I don't know. I'm still not hearing well."

"It could be temporary."

"I hope," Akroyd said. "But I wonder if it could get worse instead, if these are the last hours of hearing I'll experience."

"You could still work, no matter what. The science can get done without hearing."

"I guess. But I'd miss my wife's voice. And my son's. And music."

"We'll hurry. The sooner you see a doctor, the better."

"We'll go faster once the moon clears the eruption column," Akroyd said.

They took one rest break. Norio was tired. But the thought of getting back to the CVO and downloading the video drove him

forward. And getting those instruments recovered--just as important. He hoped he found the chance to sleep a couple hours tonight, but if he didn't, he'd manage. A night's sleep lost in exchange for recovering the instruments--now that would be an easy trade to make.

Finally, the moon came out and lit their path. The road began to rise again and, when they crested it, they could see lights in the distance, nothing volcanic, just regular electric town lights, creating an inverted bowl of light pollution glow over the whole valley. Tonight, it seemed beautiful.

They tried their cell phones and Norio's got a signal. No bars, but a signal. He tried the CVO, but he could get no connection. "I don't have a signal at all," said Akroyd.

"I may as well not, it's so weak. Here, try texting home on mine. Who knows, maybe you'll get lucky." He handed the phone over and took out the radio. Again, he heard crackling but this time, in a broken pattern that might be speech. He couldn't make out words. Screw politeness. He broke in. "Grier and Akroyd to CVO. Do you copy? Over." He let go of the transmitter button and waited, but he heard only crackling. He sent again: "If you copy, we're fine. Trying to get off the mountain. Have good data. Over." He listened again, hoping for a signal to clear but if anything the static got worse. "Grier and Akroyd, over and out," he said and turned the radio off to conserve the batteries.

Akroyd was staring at him, his face too dim in the night to read, not as if Norio was good at reading expressions anyway.

"What?" Norio said.

"You didn't mention the pilot."

Oh, right. His focus was on the need to do his work. This might be the one chance in his life to do research like this. And this was his mountain. He knew it. He owed it his loyalty. "I doubt they could hear me anyway."

Akroyd said, "Then let's go find a signal for the radio or cell, or a moving car or some damned thing so we can get him help."

They each drank a mouthful of water and took off again. Norio's legs were burning, but he had to keep going.

Corey had fallen into a fitful sleep.

Ellen and Ty sat together on the pillow of pine boughs, each with an arm around the other for warmth. Ellen felt some solace from the contact, but what she'd give to be sleeping in a warm bed, with no worries, and both his arms around her.

"Maybe I should have kept the tent. We'd be warmer," he said.

"We'll survive the night, won't we?"

"We can get up and move around from time to time. It's not cold enough to kill us."

"I guess it should be pretty far down on my list of worries," she said. "Compared to the volcano." They sat in silence for a few more minutes, then she said, "You feel good to hold on to. Even though we still have ash dried on us and textured like scouring powder."

"Wouldn't a nice clear mountain stream be nice? We could wash off."

"It'd be a bit cold. I vote for a hot shower in a nice hotel. And a big room-service breakfast with eggs and sausage and pancakes and fresh fruit."

"Stop," he said. "You're killing me. I'm so hungry I could eat for an hour straight."

"I'm worried about Corey," she said.

"Yeah, me too."

"I'd probably be in that same shape if you hadn't hung on to me so tight during the wreck."

"I wasn't about to let go. But I thought I was probably bruising you, I was holding on so hard."

"Oh, you did. And I'm grateful for every bruise. The metal of the helicopter would have done much more harm. I don't know how you found the strength."

"No? I do." His arm tightened around her. "You hurt anywhere now?"

"Anywhere? I hurt everywhere!"

In the darkness, Corey moaned. Ellen got up creakily and limped over to him, her blisters really stinging now, after the short break from hiking. Her knees were starting to seize up, too. Wincing, she knelt beside him.

"You awake?" she said softly.

"Hurts," Corey whispered.

"I know. I'm so sorry." Her hand found his and she held on, offering what comfort she could.

"Tell my wife that I love her. And my daughter."

"Stop it," she said. "You're being melodramatic. You can tell them in the morning."

"No. You tell them."

Damned man was making her eyes sting again. "They know," she said "Like you know they love you."

"Blood," he said.

"What?" She felt her fear twisting tighter. "What about blood?" He was tasting blood, he felt blood? What?

But Corey had fallen silent again. She laid her hand on his chest, and when she felt its rise and fall, the fear untwisted a mite. What could she do for him? Nothing. Let him sleep. Hope that he didn't die. Ellen didn't know when she'd felt this useless. She was good in emergencies usually, but that typically meant calling 911 and comforting a kid for a short while until an ambulance or the school nurse or a parent arrived.

When he seemed to fade into sleep, she left Corey's side and went back to Ty. "How is he?"

"Bad. Can't get breath to say a whole sentence. He's sleeping again."

"We should sleep too if we can."

"I don't see how," she said.

"Lie down, and we'll try. At least we both have something warm to wear."

"I grabbed my jacket at the last minute," she said. "June in Nebraska, you aren't thinking about freezing weather. But that morning I looked online for Mount Hood's weather, and I realized it got cold here."

"Yeah, in hindsight, good and bad decisions seem so clear," he said. "Like how I'm an idiot for not getting us off the mountain earlier this morning."

"We both wanted to stay. And how could we have known about the volcano? Don't beat yourself up for it." Was it only this morning they'd been dawdling at the campsite?

"Let's try and sleep," he said.

For a while, they lay on the fragrant pine boughs, holding each other, and Ellen heard Ty's breathing deepen. She couldn't drift off, exhausted as she was. Cold and worry won out over her physical weariness. And since Corey had mentioned his family, she couldn't help but think of hers. Would she ever see her mother again?

It was nice to lie still, with her eyes closed, and rest her body. Her mind was another matter--concern for Corey, for Ty, about the volcano kept it active. She wished she knew the trick of shutting that off.

The full moon must have cleared the eruption, for when she

opened her eyes the next time, she could see shadows cast by its light. Must be midnight already, or close to it. That was good. It meant they were half done with the night. Morning would surely bring rescue. Surely.

She was inches from sleep when Corey cried out softly. Ty didn't stir. Ellen eased out of his arms and went over to Corey. She could see him in the moonlight but couldn't tell if he was pale or flushed. She could hear him, though, whimpering softly, like a child. She thought her heart would break with the sound. Poor man. She owed him her life, and she couldn't do anything for him in return.

"Shh," she said, as if to a child.

He swam up to consciousness. "Hey," he said.

"You're doing great," she lied. "Morning isn't far off."

"Distract me."

"How?"

"Tell me about yourself. Tell me a story. Like I tell my daughter to get her to sleep."

At least he was able to talk. But his voice was weak, and that scared her.

The sleeping bag had fallen away from his arm. She took the soft fabric and tugged it up. She couldn't think of a single story. Bad librarian. She should know a thousand by heart. "How about if I sing?"

"That'd be nice."

Because her family had been on her mind, her great-grandmother came to mind. The woman had played the piano at silent movie houses in her teens and continued playing for fun until she died in her 90's, mostly old fashioned songs. As a child, Ellen had loved singing along when she visited.

She sang one of those, quietly as to not wake Ty. "Jeanine, I Dream of Lilac Time."

When she was done, Corey said, "That was nice. Do another."

She sang "After the Ball," and when he asked for another, "Let Me Call You Sweetheart." She was surprised the words were still all in her mind, for she hadn't thought of these old songs since she was a little girl.

Corey drifted back to sleep. She sat with him for ten minutes more, listening to the soft sound of his breathing, thinking, she'd been comforted by the singing at least as much as he had been.

She went back to Ty. She was surprised when he reached for her.

"Sorry I woke you," she whispered.

"I'm not."

Her mind was still on her great-grandmother, on loss, and grief. Her G-gran had gotten a good long life, but Corey hadn't yet. Nor had Ty. She said to him, "Can't I convince you to go down the mountain

now? The moon is up, and you could see your way. I really don't want you here if something goes wrong with the volcano."

"Nope."

"When we first met, I thought, now here's a nice, tractable man. And now you're so damned obdurate."

"Love those big words. Keep 'em coming." He lowered his voice to a sexy rumble. "What are you wearing, baby?"

"Volcano crust." She shook her head. "You know, I really needed a relaxing vacation this year."

"What, you're not relaxed yet?"

"Somehow, no, I'm not." The brief good humor drained too quickly away. "I hate this."

"It's not any of our restful days ever, I imagine."

"No, I hate this, right this moment most of all. Not being in charge. Not being able to do anything but rely on other people and waiting."

"I'd have guessed that. Taking charge is one of your strengths. But maybe patience isn't?"

"And understatement seems to be one of your skills."

He pulled her closer. "I'm so damned proud of you."

"I don't get it."

"You're a good person."

"No. You were right. I'm impatient and have a nasty sense of humor."

"You're tough when you need to be. And tender when you need to be."

Her face was hot with embarrassment, but she said nothing, just buried her face against his scratchy shoulder. "Don't forget bossy." she mumbled.

"Only in the best ways. If we don't make it out of here," he said, "for whatever reason, I want you to know...." He said nothing for several seconds.

"Yes?"

"It's been a great last three days of life. Spending it with you."

She nodded against his chest. Yes, her too.

She thought about how much better she was at fighting than at waiting. Her life back home had been full of little struggles, and she knew now most of it had been in vain. Why pound your head against a brick wall? The skull will give before the wall does. She recognized the tension in her muscles as one she'd been carrying for a very long time, keeping herself braced, ready for a fight, with administration, parents, even the kids.

But this opponent was too big to fight. Either the volcano would get them, or it wouldn't. Either rescue would come, or it wouldn't. The moon would shine out strong in its own time and the sun would rise

when it was supposed to. She had done all she could for now. She willed herself to accept that.

Ty's arms were warm around her back. She took comfort from the sensation and closed her eyes, finally relaxing and drifting into sleep.

Norio had been hiking for at least two hours in the moonlight when he finally got through on the radio. Akroyd was lagging several yards behind. At the CVO, Greg was on duty again, excitement punctuating his voice. "Man, are we happy to hear from you. Is Akroyd with you?"

"Yeah. We had a helicopter accident. We have some great shots, though, video of the eruption. And some gas readings from the moments right before the eruption, if we can get to them."

There was a pause. "Sorry. I had somebody call Akroyd's wife. She's been calling here every half hour. You say you're both fine? Where are you? Over."

"On some damned forest road. Let me get out the GPS. Wait." He turned on the GPS and gave Greg the reading.

"Plugging it in to the map. Okay, I see where you are, on a forest road. About two miles down, it tees into a real road, gravel, I think. Turn left and there's a--hang on, switching to satellite view--okay, a ranch maybe, or a farm, barely a mile on. Then another four, five miles to another one. Then maybe three more miles to quite a bit of housing."

Akroyd finally huffed his way to the top of the hill. "Got something?"

Norio nodded. Into the radio he said, "Get down the GPS location of the instruments we left behind, just in case."

"Tell them about the pilot first," Akroyd said. "Their location."

Norio read the GPS for the instruments first. But he also read those for the injured pilot's location.

Greg confirmed. "We'll see what we can do, but you know they won't fly until first light. Can you get yourselves down the hill? Most of the bridges are out, so getting to you with a car will take some time. I imagine it'll be dawn before we can do anything."

"Roger that."

"It's good to hear from you. Anything else? I gotta go."

"No, that's it, over and out," he said. Norio could see that retrieving those instruments would probably fall on his own shoulders. He said to Akroyd. "You up for another bit of walking?"

"If we have to. I can't get through on my cell phone here."

"It's downhill now, at least."

Forty-five minutes later they were knocking on the door of a white ranch house. A security light shone in the side yard. At their knock, dogs began to bark out back. That's all they'd need, dogs attacking them. But none appeared; they must be fenced in. He found the bell

and rang, and then he pounded on the door again.

A man in a robe appeared at a window next to the door, a shotgun in his hand. "Who the hell are you?"

"We were in a helicopter crash up on the mountain. We could use some help," said Akroyd.

The man studied them for a moment. He turned away from the window. Norio waited impatiently, and finally the front door opened.

Akroyd introduced himself and Norio.

"What were you doing in a helicopter?"

"Taking readings on the volcano gasses."

"You're scientists?" said the man.

"We study the volcano," said Norio.

"Then why the hell didn't you know it was about to blow?"

Norio bit back a reply.

"They can be unpredictable," Akroyd said. "We knew it was rumbling, but the eruption came faster than anyone could have known."

The rancher still hadn't backed out of the doorway. "If this gets worse, we could lose everything," he said.

Like it's our fault you build your frickin' home on the side of a volcano, thought Norio.

"We have an injured man," said Akroyd. "A helicopter pilot. And two others we left with him, in okay shape. Our cell phones aren't working yet. Could we call for help for our people on your phone?"

"For heaven's sake, Edward, let them in," said a woman's voice.

The rancher backed off and gave a curt nod, which Norio took as an invitation to enter.

Akroyd said, "Thank you ma'am. Where's the phone? You have a land line?"

The woman, dressed in a lavender sweat suit, nodded and led him back through a doorway. He heard Akroyd say, "Can you talk for me? My hearing got damaged in the blast. I'll tell you the details, but you'll need to listen for me."

The rancher finally cracked open his shotgun and Norio breathed a little easier. "You want some coffee?" the man asked as he pocketed shells.

"Thank you. Water, maybe."

"Mariah, get this guy some water!" he called. Distantly, outside, the dogs started barking again.

"Get it your own self," the woman called. "I'm busy here!"

When the rancher went into the kitchen, Norio sat down on a flowered sofa and glanced around the room. Kitschy knickknacks, family photos, fake posies in straw baskets. The place smelled fake floral, like one of those plug-in room deodorizer things.

The three of them came out of the kitchen all at once, the man with a glass of water for Norio.

"The bridges are out, the roads across the Sandy are impossible. They can get an ambulance here but it'll take almost three hours," said Akroyd. "Best bet is a medical helicopter, if we can get one at dawn."

Norio finished drinking the water and flipped open his cell phone, which was showing no bars, still. He checked the time.

"We can at least get your friends down here to our place," said the woman. "If the road is clear up to them. Can't we, Ed?"

"I suppose. If you think it's safe to drive up there."

"For now it sure is," Akroyd said.

They decided Norio would go back up with the rancher in his SUV, while Akroyd stayed here with the woman and called his family and the CVO and tried to arrange for a medevac flight. Out there, the volcano was still erupting without him. As soon as he could, he needed to get back to it.

"If they have a computer," Norio said to Akroyd, "get online and look at whatever is up. Seismograms, news footage. Or turn on the TV, if they don't have access. Try to get us up to speed."

"Sure, sure," said Akroyd. "Just get the others down here safely, okay?"

Norio joined the rancher. It took twenty-five jouncing minutes to retrace their path up the mountain. The three others they had left behind appeared in the headlights. Norio jumped out and said, "How is he?"

Ty squinted back at him in glare of the headlights. "Worse, but he's still alive." He came forward to shake the rancher's hand and introduce himself and his girl. "Thank you for coming. We were freezing out here."

The four of them lifted the pilot into the rear of the SUV as carefully as they could.

"Sorry about your car seats," said Ellen to the rancher, as she got inside. "My jeans are still filthy with ash."

"Don't worry about it. It'll clean up," said the rancher. "Looks like you two had a close call."

"Too close," said the woman. "We were camping last night. Hiking the day before that."

"Your name might be on the TV," the rancher said. "Sixteen hikers are missing. And that's just the ones they know about."

"They didn't know about us," said Ty. "McNeil trail doesn't require a permit." He added, "Not that the permit boxes could have survived the pyroclastic flow. I wonder how they knew about the other names."

"Maybe family called them in," said the rancher.

Norio was just about to get in the car when he realized he was

closer to recovering the instruments right here than he'd likely be for hours. He leaned on the open car door. "I'm not coming."

"What?" the rancher asked.

"It's your damned instruments, isn't it?" said Ellen.

"Yeah, it is. I have to get them safe and back to the office." And he wanted to be on the mountain, though it'd take him hours to get anywhere useful--useful and possibly dangerous, same thing.

Ty said, "Look, why don't you get some food, take a nap, and then go up? Or maybe you can get a rental car delivered to you out here and drive halfway back."

"I don't know."

The rancher said, "Hell, I don't know what you're talking about, but if you want to come up here again, I'll drive you back after you've eaten and rested a bit."

Norio could feel the eruption pulling him like a magnet, but he knew they were right. He needed food to eat and food to take with him, if he were going to hike back in.

When they got back to the farmhouse, they decided not to move the unconscious pilot again. The rancher went and got an extra blanket to throw over him. His wife had fresh-baked muffins, a carafe of coffee, and a bowl of fruit set out on the table. She came out and tutted over the pilot who was now fevered and still. The ranch wife led the hikers inside and into a back room for a shower. Akroyd went into the kitchen with the rancher and called back in on the landline to confirm the medevac helicopter for dawn at this address.

When he got off, Norio told him his plans.

"Well, I guess I can come," said Akroyd.

"No, you get back to your family. And get your hearing checked, too. I can handle it alone."

"You might be more in the center of action if you get back into CVO and find another helicopter."

"I might. But how long might that take? And what might I find out on the mountain this morning instead?"

"Who knows if there might not be a lateral eruption in your direction?"

"Maybe I'll get a chance to retrieve the instruments first. Maybe I'll be able to record something important, something that will even help predict future eruptions."

"I'm worried about you. You haven't even slept."

"I'll nap an hour, and I'll be fine. I'm worried about your hearing. Get it attended to. Now let me call around and see if I can get a rental car."

But there were none. Incoming journalists had snatched them all up. It was a big story, national and international. A call into the CVO

confirmed that there were no helicopters available, either. He asked Greg to find him an intern, anyone, who could bring his car to the ranch house later that day, and Greg promised he'd work on it.

After eating and taking a short nap, Norio packed some food and water into Ty's pack, which the man insisted Norio take. The rancher, still grumbling about not understanding why he was returning to the mountain after working so hard to get off it, took him back up the fire road. When his GPS indicated he was as close as he could get to the instruments as the road allowed, he told the man to stop.

"You sure about this?" the rancher asked.

"Positive."

His exhaustion could be ignored. If he got injured, that would heal. But scientific discoveries, revelations about the natural world at moments like these, those were forever. Knowledge would last as long as people lasted. And his mountain was calling.

^ ^ ^

Ellen stood in the spare bedroom and thanked Mariah for probably the fourth time and the woman said, "Stop, now. You two get yourselves clean and I'll get you some clothes for you to put on. Ed's should fit you fairly well, Ty, but mine are going to be a little loose on you, I'm afraid, hon."

"As long as they're clean, I'll feel like Cinderella," said Ellen.

"And when you're dressed, I'll have a full breakfast ready for you. How does that sound?"

"Like heaven," Ellen said. "You're so kind."

"If people can't help strangers at such times, what kind of world would it be?" She left the room.

Ty said to Ellen, "You can shower first."

"Thanks. I won't be long."

The shower was heaven. She tried to hurry, but the encrusted ash wasn't easy to get off her arms or neck. At times, she had to peel chunks of dried ash off, leaving her skin red and raw. As she shut off the water she thought her hair might not be entirely clean yet. But it was Ty's turn, while there was still hot water. She came out in a towel, a second towel wrapped around her head, and he was sitting on the floor, slumped against the bed. He looked terribly tired.

"Hey, your turn," she said, kissing him on his forehead. "Ack, grit. Get clean so I can kiss you for real."

"Great motivator," he said. With a groan he stood and went into the bathroom. Ellen dressed in a pair of pink sweatpants and a flowered top, hideous looking but clean. Her suitcase and carry-on bag were in her car's trunk along with her laptop, which was still probably

safe in the Walmart parking lot, but who knew when she'd be able to get back there?

She sprawled onto the bed and waited for Ty and when he came out they stood, her in her goofy pink outfit, him in a towel, and held each other for a long, sweet moment. "We did good, kid," he said. "We're alive."

She left to let him get dressed and joined the others in the kitchen. "The food looks amazing," said Ellen, sitting down. "I'm starving. You'd think it had been days and not hours since I ate last."

"We burned a lot of energy carrying Corey down," said Ty, coming in the door, tucking in his shirt.

Oh gods, Corey, she'd forgotten. Ellen jumped to her feet. "How is he? Has anyone checked on him?"

"Sit," said Mariah. "He's breathing. He's unconscious. All we can do is wait for the experts to come and care for him. You can go see him again when you've eaten something."

Ellen was torn. But she realized it was true, there was still nothing she could do for Corey. And if he wasn't conscious, he wouldn't know if she stood over him or not. She sank into the chair. She was so tired and hungry. She wanted to eat. She wanted a real bed. And she wanted to wake up with Ty next to her in that bed and celebrate being alive with him.

After breakfast, she checked Corey, who was looking flushed. His breathing was even but rapid. She wanted to wake him--to see if he could wake, to reassure herself--but she stopped herself. Whether he was asleep or unconscious, at least he wasn't feeling pain right now. Let the poor man be.

Forty minutes after dawn, the medical helicopter arrived. The medics took Corey and Akroyd. The EMT in the helicopter looked at Ty and Ellen too, listened to their chests, and said, "You need to go in too, this morning, as soon as you can. You've been breathing ash, and they're saying the gas is even worse."

"What hospital are you taking them to?" asked Ty.

"Pacific."

The helicopter took off with Corey and Akroyd, leaving Ellen and Ty to find their own route to help. "We'll go to the same hospital," said Ty. "We'll be able to find out how he's doing much more easily. Maybe get into his room later on to see for ourselves."

"If he lives," said Ellen, watching the helicopter speed east. She had survivor's guilt, she realized, even though Corey was still alive.

"Everything could work out," she said, trying to reassure herself.

"It will," said Ty.

She hoped he was right. Turning west and looking up into the brightening sky, the sight of the continuing eruption did not reassure

her.

Day 2, south flank.

Jim never wanted another night like this one. Before all light faded, he searched everywhere around the trailer for tire chains, but there weren't any. He found a folding shovel in one of the storage lockers, better than the dustpan, and cleaned the roof with it before heading inside for fitful sleep.

Twice during the night he got up and went out into a pitch-black world of swirling ash. The flakes brushed his face like cobwebs, like ghostly fingers. The worst was the absolute darkness. He couldn't see his own hands gripping the shovel.

By feel, he made his way around the trailer and up the ladder again. Once on the roof, he moved a few inches at a time, patting all around himself to make sure the edge of the roof wasn't close. He was so worried about falling off, so disoriented in the total darkness, it took him twice the time to clear it than it had when it was light. The tension of walking on a roof blind was like the tension right before a big test that he hadn't studied for at all, multiplied times ten, and lasting ten times as long. By the time he crawled shakily down the ladder, he was tired out by clenching his muscles against the fall that had never come.

As he worked cleaning the roof the second time that night, he thought of the stories his father and mother had told about the old country and how they had to run for their lives or hide from men with guns, how his grandparents had been lucky to survive wars, how many far-ago ancestors had to fight the Chinese. All that had sounded distant and boring to him. But up on the roof, alone in the dark, feeling the weight of responsibility for keeping his family safe, with the edge of the roof one misstep away, he had begun to understand that there had been real terror for the people in the old stories. He was not the first of his family to feel fear or to have to do something difficult in the face of uncontrollable forces. He understood that despite his fear of falling, despite the ash irritating his eyes, that he still had it easier than others had it before him, and he glimpsed that there must be a whole range of terrors that surpassed his own.

Inside, his mother was waiting up for him, fretful and wanting to help. As he stripped off his outer layers, she began to cough.

For a few minutes, it wasn't very bad. She got control over the cough, sipped some tea, and offered him a cup. He declined and went to the sofa to try and catch some more sleep.

That's when his mother started coughing again, much worse. After

a minute, it hadn't stopped, and Jim got up to see if he could help her. She waved him off and sat, hunched over, hacking and hacking. The cough possessed her, wracking her body. Jim hovered, trying to think of something he could do--pound her on the back? He helped her stand up, thinking that might relieve her, but it didn't. He did tentatively slap her on the back, but that did nothing. In between coughing fits lasting minutes, for maybe fifteen seconds at a stretch, she was able to stop and breathe. But then the cough started up again.

Finally, he was worried enough to wake his father from the back bedroom. Jim stepped to the other side of the main room and watched his father try to help his mother. He figured maybe the ash floating off him was causing the problem, or making it worse, so he kept his distance.

By the time dawn broke, all of them were up and watching his mother with worry. Lida was rigid with fear. He couldn't coax a word out of her, nor could he spend much time trying. He did what he could to help his father comfort his mother, but when she coughed, her face turned purple with straining for oxygen. The awful question would not leave his mind: could she die if they didn't get out of here?

His mother went to the bathroom. She was still coughing, but behind the shut door, it was muffled. His father peered through a window. "Almost no ash in air now."

"What?"

"Come look." Father waved Jim to his side at the window. Sure enough, the sky was visible, and while you couldn't call it blue, through the thin airborne ash you could see that blue might still exist up there, somewhere too far away to help them.

Jim's heart lifted. "We can go?"

"We must go. Your mother needs help."

"What about the roads?" They wouldn't be any better than yesterday, would they?

His father looked distraught. The expression made Jim's insides feel cold. He had never seen his father helpless or this worried.

"Don't worry," Jim said. "We'll make it somehow."

"I will go out and see about the car," his father said. "You keep watch on Mother."

While he kept half his attention on the coughing sounds in the bathroom, Jim filled water bottles at the kitchen sink and lined them up next to the door. He looked back at his sister huddled in the corner of the sofa. "Lida, go find Mother something to cover her face with. A handkerchief or men's shirt." His sister didn't look up. He shut off the water and set down the last water bottle.

He went to sit by his sister. "Lida, we need to get going."

No response. For a moment, his mother's coughing stilled, too.

He put his arm around Lida and pulled her to him. "It's going to be fine, sister. We're getting out of here. You're safe. You'll be fine. Mom will be fine."

She shook her head fractionally. Back in the bathroom, his mother began another round of coughing and he could feel Lida tense at the noise.

"Everything will work out. You'll see." He gave Lida a last squeeze, disentangled himself, and went to check his mother. Through the bathroom door, she choked out that she was fine, which she obviously was not. There was nothing more he could think to do for her. He went to find a handkerchief in the back bedroom. He rifled through the drawers and closets, finding none, but finally deciding on a light pink shirt, a woman's but with a button-down collar like a man's. The material was a loose enough weave that his mother could still breathe through it when the coughing took her, but it might still give protection from the worst of the ash particles. Roughly, he ripped it into thick strips to use as masks for them all, glad for the chance to vent his frustration on something.

By the time he was done, his father was back with his mother, in the living room, squatting in front of her and resting his hand on her knee. His mother was fighting back against her coughing fit, clamping her lips shut. Tears filled her eyes at the effort to not cough.

Jim said, "I'm going up to get the shovel I left on the roof. Is the car unlocked?"

His father nodded. "While you do that, I will write a note to the people here, say we are sorry and will pay for damage."

Jim took the filled water bottles with him. He carried them to the car and put them in the back. Then he climbed up on the roof, grateful for the growing daylight that made him feel less nervous about the height. He grabbed the shovel and tossed it off the roof. It hit the ground with a muffled thump, and a cloud of ash puffed out where it hit.

Climbing down the hated roof for the last time, he put the shovel in the back seat of the car, on the floor where he could get to it, and he went to the front door of the trailer, brushed his pants off, and kicked his feet against the step to dislodge the worst of the ash on his shoes before opening the door. "Ready," he said. "How 'bout you guys?"

"Yes," said Father, and Mother struggled to her feet. Jim could see her working to draw in enough air. Why was she taking the ash so badly and he, who had been out in it so long, was fine? Doctors might be able to tell them, if only they had the chance to get to doctors.

He looked at Lida, still huddled in the corner of the sofa. He walked over and offered her his hands. "Let's go," he said.

She sat still, staring down at the floor.

"C'mon," he said. "Where's your wildflower book?"

She looked up at that, then around the room. The book was over on the table, and Jim pointed to it. Lida was too big to carry, or he'd just pick her up. He needed to get her moving on her own.

He said, "You don't want to leave the book here. Not after all the good work you did with those flowers."

She looked to the table, staring dumbly at it. Finally, she unfolded herself and walked over, taking her book and hugging it to her chest like a shield. Jim put a hand on her shoulder and guided her to the door. He could feel her muscles quivering, little earthquakes of muscle twitching under his hand all the way out to the car.

His father got his mother settled, started the car and put it into gear, but the wheels spun uselessly on the thick ash. Without a word, Jim pulled up his mask, got out of the car with the shovel and dug around the tires, clearing ash until he felt asphalt. Was there something about rear-wheel or front-wheel drive that mattered to how he should do this? Since he had no idea if that was so, or which their car was anyway, he took the time to dig out all four tires and a short path in front of each. Though the ashfall was very light now, he still needed the mask, for his shoveling stirred up the fallen ash and created a small cloud of ash drifting about him.

Should he get in the car? No, he'd wait to see if it worked. He stood out of the way and motioned his father to drive. This time, the tires bit and the car moved forward. When it went up the ramp of ash he had dug, he saw it skid at once, the tires skiing sideways. Jim backed off further, not wanting to get hit if the car came swinging around without warning.

Fishtailing through the ash, the car made slow progress. Jim followed. The brake lights came on. What the--? Wondering why his father has braked, Jim hurried up to the driver's door. His father pointed to the back seat, emphatic. Jim held up a finger and went about shoveling out the tires again, giving his father another runway of clear road to start with, this one longer than the first.

He climbed back in the car. Shifting into drive again, his father inched them forward. Jim could feel the car slipping sideways beneath him as it hit the deeper ash. The instinct to fling out a hand and grab onto something was strong, but it wasn't necessary. Instead of holding on, he reached over and rested his hand on Lida's arm. "We're getting there," he said, intending encouragement.

But honestly, they weren't getting much of anywhere. His mother was coughing again, trying to hide it by covering her face with both hands, but failing. The sound made Jim more anxious. After ten nerve-wracking minutes, the car reached the turnoff onto the fire road. His

father slowed further for the turn. The car bogged down once more.

"It might be better if I stayed out there, walked behind you. You won't be going much faster than I can walk," Jim said. "And every time I open the door, ash will drift in. Mother's cough will get worse."

His father nodded, but his eyes, when he turned them on Jim, looked miserable. He looked older, the lines on his face having deepened in the last twenty hours. Jim felt older himself, but on his father the overnight aging looked bad.

"You're doing great," he said to his father, and he left the car to dig them out a third time.

When the car began moving again, he walked well to the side, trying to stay out of the ash cloud its tires tossed up. The rear end kept fishtailing in the ash. His father must be growing weary from the strain of fighting the skid all the time. As they moved down the mountain, the road got worse, and now a skid off the edge could send them tumbling down a steep slope. And listening to Mother coughing next to him would also be wearing on him. Jim felt a welling of sympathy and love for his father, doing everything he could for the family. And behind that, a deep ocean of guilt. They wouldn't even be here on this mountain in the first place if his father hadn't have been concerned about Jim. He really had let his grades slip this year. He knew he could do better. Everything his father had said had been right, hadn't it?

The car died. Maybe the air filter again? Jim walked to the hood and motioned for his father to pop it. Again, he cleaned the filter. The skies overhead were light enough that he could look through it. No light at all shone through. He took it over to a tree and banged it hard against the trunk, sending bits of grit sailing out from it. Looking through it again, he thought he had done better that time, with little spots of light showing through the weave of the filter. He replaced it and slammed the hood.

In this way they drove slowly down the road, Jim walking, digging out the car when it got stuck. The car died. Again, Jim cleaned out the air filter, replaced it, and shut the hood. His father leaned forward to turn the key.

This time the car didn't start.

Jim and his father looked at each other, his father's face mirroring what Jim felt: wide-eyed horror. They could not get stuck here. Again his father focused on the ignition. Still no sound from the car.

Jim motioned for his father to pop the hood again. He made sure he had the air filter back in there correctly, though he imagined that couldn't be the problem. He looked at everything else under the hood, all of it coated with ash. Damn, he should have brought the broom, too. He tried blowing at it, but that did little to disturb the ash, still

slightly damp and sticky. He stripped off his mask and used that to beat at every surface he could see that looked important, every electrical connection and piece that looked like it touched another working part. Without tools, he could do no more.

When the surfaces were clear of ash, he slammed the hood and gave his father a thumbs-up. His father leaned forward.

Only a faint click from the under the hood. Click. Click, a third time. Then silence. It wasn't going to start.

They were stranded.

Jim motioned for his father to roll down the window an inch. "I'll walk out to the main highway," he said.

"No." His father's tone brooked no disagreement. "It's too far."

Shit. Jim got back in the car.

Mother wasn't coughing. But her breathing was raspy now, loud in the confined space. There was a hitch to it, too, every time she tried to inhale. It was a frightening sound, a desperate sound.

His father turned. "The main road will be covered too. It must be many miles before you can find people. And what direction is best?"

He nodded, appreciating that his father was bothering to explain why he'd said no.

If it weren't for his mother's awful reaction to the ash--why her? Jim wondered again--they could walk back to the trailer. But they were stuck here. The skies were clear, though. He could even see some patches of blue outside the car window.

"Turn on the hazard lights," said Jim. "It can't hurt."

They sat for another half-hour, not speaking, the hazard light click accompanying his mother's increasingly labored breathing. She seemed to be running out of energy to cough.

He thought again about asking permission to find help, but he didn't really believe there was anyone for many miles around. If there were someone, they were sure to be in just as bad a situation. If he was going to die--he blinked at the thought, realizing this was the first time he had applied that word to himself. Fine. If he was going to *die*, he'd rather be with his family. And if his mother was going to die, it should be with her firstborn child at her side. His throat closed in grief.

Another coughing fit overwhelmed his mother. Jim reached over and put his arm around Lida as they listened to Mother coughing. In between coughs, she wheezed horribly as she tried to get enough air.

Jim remembered his shaman's bracelet and dug in his pockets. He reached forward and handed it to his father. "For Mother," he said.

Father took the bracelet and slipped it on her wrist. Jim knew it wouldn't help her, but it might help Father.

A moment later, Father began to click the headlights off and on.

He honked the horn, the thin sound making Jim feel even more remote and helpless. His mother was going to die, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Then a thrumming noise came from outside. Out of the sky a helicopter appeared, like a good air spirit. It swooped down in front of them. Jim leapt out of the car and waved his arms. "We're here!" he cried, running down the road, waving madly.

The helicopter hovered for a moment and moved off ahead. Jim's heart crawled into his throat. They had surely seen him. They wouldn't leave them here, would they? As the helicopter started coming down far ahead, he realized it had to find a treeless place to land. It must have found one, as it slipped down behind some trees and out of sight. Jim ran in its direction, kicking up ash with his feet, yelling the whole way.

A man got out of the green military helicopter and called something Jim couldn't hear. The rotor blades were stirring up the ash on the ground, creating a cloud that nearly obscured the man.

He strode forward out of the ash to meet Jim, leaning down to yell nearly in his ear. "You okay, son?"

"My mother is awfully sick. She needs help, fast."

"You got it." He turned and waved his arm in a circle. A second man came out and Jim led them back to the car. The two men made a seat of their forearms and carried his mother to the helicopter, his father trailing anxiously just behind. Jim had to pull Lida out of the car, and she kept stumbling. He couldn't lift her, but he could pull her along. Finally, about halfway there, she came out of her daze and began walking on her own toward the noisy whirring blades of the helicopter.

In moments, they lifted off and cleared the little cloud of ash the blades had kicked up. The helicopter swung over the trees. Out the window, Jim could see the eruption now, and the ash cloud drifting off to the west, over other people, putting them into the same troubles his family had just been in. Jim watched the eruption boiling up and out, unnerved by the sight. He was happy when the helicopter changed directions and the eruption was behind him, out of sight.

Section IV. After

Dawn. Camas Firehouse.

Chad limped in to the firehouse, still exhausted despite eight hours of sleeping like the dead. He needed to figure out where a refugee center was so that he could shower there and maybe get some clean clothes, if someone had organized donated clothing this soon. If not, maybe he'd take his muddy self into Walmart and buy something fresh. He thought of his clothes back at the duplex, some in milk crates on the floor, and he winced. He couldn't afford to replace everything he owned. His laptop was on the kitchen counter, he thought. He hoped. Something else he couldn't pay for, along with a doctor.

Inside the firehouse, everyone else looked exhausted, too. He raised a hand at A.J., who detoured over. "You haven't been working all night, have you?"

"No, only until seven or eight last night. Then I slept in my car and here I am again." He realized his hearing was better. He still had vague ringing in his ears, but no worse than the day after a concert. One more thing to feel grateful for. "Have you heard anything about Francie?"

"She's doing fine. You did great, I heard, getting them both out of there on your own, her and the injured woman. That woman is in ICU, and she has you to thank for her projected recovery." AJ slapped him on his shoulder.

Chad couldn't help wincing.

"I'm sorry. You're hurt somewhere?"

"I'm hurt everywhere," Chad said, managing to laugh. "I'll let you know if I find a spot that isn't aching." He looked down at the dried gray mud all over him. "Or muddy."

"Take a shower here. There's plenty of water, so don't skimp. Go on up and I'll get you some coveralls to wear. They'll be a little scratchy but better than what you have on. I can't do anything about shoes, I'm afraid."

"I'll have to go through the mud again to get to my car anyway. And I have my work shoes in there. I want to go see Francie in the hospital. Which is she in?"

"Pacific. Get your shower. I'll be right up."

Chad got to the bottom of the stairs and eyed them with doubt. He grabbed the railing and started hopping up on his good foot. After three steps, he was too tired to continue. Gingerly, he put his weight back on his bad foot and stayed up on his toes while he continued up

on both feet. Two steps from the top, he saw Kane come from the hallway and stop dead at the top of the stairs.

"You headed somewhere, young man?"

Old man, more like it. Chad ached like his arthritic grandmother must. "Shower."

"There are refugee centers, you know."

"I do know. Excuse me," he said, limping up the last two steps.

"You shouldn't be here."

"Maybe not," said Chad calmly, looking Kane up and down. "But that's a real funny thing to hear from a man who doesn't have a drop of dirt on him."

Kane gawped at him.

"I bet you didn't ever get out into it, did you? Not for a minute. Just stayed right here, safe and clean." Chad shook his head in disgust and walked away from the man.

He heard Kane sputtering behind him, but he pushed through to the showers and the noise was gone. Chad stripped off his filthy clothes and looked around for a trashcan, but there wasn't one big enough to hold them. He kicked them into a corner and stepped into the large shower. What he wanted was one of those old-people seat things like his grandmother had in her tub. Ah, jeez, it hurt to move. He made it to the faucets and turned them on.

The water stung him in a dozen places. Chad bit his lip against making a sound and gingerly began to soap himself. Dried mud gave way to the water and sluiced off him. He could see bruises coming up on his left arm and above his left hipbone. Both thighs had a horizontal line of bruising like he'd braced a board against himself, but he couldn't remember doing so. Mystery bruises. Where the jack had flew out and hit his shin, there was a gigantic purple bruise and broken skin. He reached down to feel a knot there. He twisted around to check his Achilles--clearly swollen. His feet each had five to ten stinging cuts on the bottom. The scratch from the dog's claw was outlined in red, and he thought it might be getting infected. He was washing his hair for the second time when he heard the door open. Let it not be Kane. He was willing to kick the man's butt, but not naked.

It was A.J. He carried a folded blue jumpsuit.

Chad shut off the water.

AJ looked him over and said, "Oh, man. You are in bad shape. Look at those bruises."

"I did sort of trip around out there."

A.J. made a spinning motion with his finger. Chad turned his back and stood there dripping. A.J. said, "Good God, son. How long were you out there?"

"Nine hours, off and on. In the mud for most of that."

"You need a doctor. By the look of that arm, you need antibiotics. I'll get a med kit and do some first aid on you right now. Dry off. Don't get dressed yet. I'll be back."

Chad patted himself dry on a scratchy white towel from a stack on a wire shelf, wishing for a softer one. He wrapped the damp towel around his waist and sat on a bench. He crossed his bad leg over his good and prodded at the Achilles. Ouch. It was puffy and tender, even to the lightest touch. He'd be paying for this day for the next year. But he'd have the memory of the day forever, too, of helping a few people. Of saving that dog, even. Maybe that wasn't a bad trade-off, a year of discomfort for helping the crazy man, the pinned woman, Francie, and someone's pet. He tried not to think about the bodies they'd seen and the failure that represented.

A.J. banged back in with a first aid kit and set about cleaning and bandaging Chad's cuts.

"Quit shaking your head like that," said Chad. "You look like a mother. Next thing you'll be making tscking sounds."

"I am a father," said A.J. "And if I were yours, I'd be damned proud of you."

Chad's throat tightened. "Thanks," he managed.

"You need a doctor, at least for antibiotics. We've had someone making calls to international rescue teams for info, and it seems there's bad infection rates with lahar mud. People stuck in it for more than 36 hours seldom even survive the infection."

"That's awful," Chad said. "But I really can't afford a grand to go to an ER. Do you know of a local doctor who'll charge less?"

"I'll call around," said A.J. "We'll get you a script for Cipro called in to start with. It's the least we can do. Francie would have been in trouble without you."

"I would have been in trouble without her. She really keeps her head in an emergency."

"That's good to hear," A.J. said, "Put your feet up on the bench here."

"I think those little cuts on my feet were the skin splitting from being wet for so long. Like when you wrinkle up from swimming all day?" He bit off a gasp as A.J.'s hand grabbed his right heel.

"Sorry. What's wrong?"

"Only my dang Achilles tendon. I hurt it last year and it flared up again yesterday."

"I wouldn't wonder. I'll tape it for you. But you really should see a doc about that. You could need surgery if it's hurt badly enough."

What a laugh. Like he could afford surgery.

Finally, A.J. had him patched up and he was able to pull on the jumpsuit. As uncomfortable as promised. "I think I should trash my

clothes," he said, pointing to them.

"Definitely. I'll take care of it."

"I appreciate the help."

"We appreciate yours, Chad. You're going to make a great firefighter one day."

"Thanks," Chad said, but oddly, he didn't feel much of a glow from hearing it. Two days ago, obsessing over being a pest here, he might have wept with gratitude over hearing such a thing. Today? No, but maybe he was just tired. A.J. shook his hand, grabbed the medical kit, and left him alone.

Chad picked up his filthy shoes, thought about washing them out, realized since he had to track back through the mud again to get to his car, there was little point to it. He didn't want to get the bandages wet, though. Inspiration struck, and he went to the kitchen, found bright blue trash bags, took four, and went downstairs toward the storage room for duct tape. He'd tape a double layer of trash bags over his feet and calves and that'd protect him from the mud. If he didn't have to go into that mess again, ever, after this one last walk, he'd be a happy man. While he was in the kitchen, he grabbed two energy bars and stuck them in his pocket.

In the storage room he found the tape and made himself long plastic socks of the trash bags, sealing them over his pant legs. He hoped no girls saw him looking like this, but it should suffice to keep his feet dry. He pulled on his shoes over them. Good enough. Time to get going.

On the way through the main bay, he shook hands with some more guys and was about to leave the firehouse when he heard his name. He turned to see Battalion Chief Rausch coming his way. Straightening his spine, Chad said, "Yes sir?"

"A.J. tells me you're injured pretty badly."

"Not too bad."

"Your Achilles again?"

Chad nodded. He was surprised Rausch remembered about the injury.

"I'm going to look into how we can get you covered for treatment. There has to be something. No promises, but something can get worked out. Oh, and A.J. says, there'll be a prescription waiting for you at the Vancouver Walmart pharmacy when they open at eight."

"Thank you, Chief." The pharmacy was on his way to the Portland hospital where Francie was, so he could swing by for it.

Rausch shook his hand. "Great job out there. We all appreciate it. Now get some rest. You deserve it."

In the corner of the ER waiting room, Ellen and Ty sat together, heads almost touching, talking in low tones. Around them was noise and bustle as other victims of the volcano came in. Ash inhalation, mostly, asthmatics and the elderly. A few people were covered with dried mud.

After the ranch woman had brought them here, they had asked, first thing, about the pilot, telling a sympathetic-looking nurse their story. She had checked, and asked them not to repeat that she'd told them, as it was against regulations to give out the information, but he was in surgery and was expected to survive. They could see him, if all went well, tomorrow morning.

They had celebrated the news with cups of vending-machine hot chocolate and waited to be checked out at triage. The nurse there said, for the gas exposure and ash inhalation, they'd need treatment, but they were not the highest priority patients, as they weren't in immediate distress. They'd need a neurological consult, too, because Ty had been unconscious, so if they could wait and be patient until the right specialists came down and a room opened up?

They could.

Ellen phoned her mother from Ty's phone and left a message on her machine and asked her to tell Claire she was fine, too and post an update to Facebook. She put off mentioning how very close she'd been to the disaster. That conversation could wait.

She and Ty created a little cocoon of silence, as far as they could from the television showing endless coverage of the volcano. Ellen was exhausted but content to be safe. And to be here with Ty.

Ty said, "I can't imagine anyone handling this last day any better than you have."

Ellen said, "Everybody's good in a crisis, right?"

"Not everyone. And it's the hard times that matter, don't you think? I know so much about you, now. I know you keep your sense of humor, for sure."

She shook her head, shy at the praise.

"And you were great with the injured pilot."

"No more so than you." She had been impressed from the first with Ty's calm, the way his mind had kept working so well from the initial blast and run to the cave, how he analyzed and planned where others might have panicked, how he was able to turn the tent into a signal and the sleeping bag into a stretcher. He'd be a good guy to have around in any crisis. And at times, life was one crisis after another, wasn't it?

"I wish you'd stay."

Ellen raised her eyebrows. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Stay with me, if you're willing. If not, please, at least in Portland, at least for the summer. I want you here longer, though." He leaned in closer and his voice dropped. "I want you in my life. There'd be a hole in it if you left now."

"What if it's only the circumstances?" she asked, fighting to be logical, to listen to her head and not her heart. "People feel connected in a disaster. Maybe we won't in a month. Maybe you'll hate the way I criticize your favorite television show or you'll drive me nuts with the toilet seat issue."

"I can't imagine either of us being so petty." He took her hand. "Not after this."

Ellen couldn't disagree. What happened up there had tied them together. It also made clear what was important and what wasn't. She realized all her stress this last year at work had been a waste of energy. If she didn't like the situation, she could leave it. She was done with fake catastrophes now that she knew what a real one was like.

As for her and Ty? Maybe it was just the crisis that had made her feel close to him, but why should that be any less reasonable a start to a good relationship than a bland start or a drunken start or an accidental start?

To hell with logic. She said, "Yes, I'll stay. In town, at least for the summer. And we'll see about more." But she thought she would want more, could look into her future and easily imagine typing a letter of resignation to her job back in Nebraska, where the problems now seemed silly. This was what mattered. Survival. Connection. Courage. Hope.

And passion. She still wanted a chance to make love with this man. She could imagine that easily, too. She could imagine more: moving in with him to a house with a bay window that looked out at the distant glaciers of the Cascades, growing old with him and having the mountains always there to remind her of how they met. She could see herself old and white-haired, a little stoop-shouldered, sitting at a scarred wooden kitchen table with their grandchildren asking her to tell them again about the day Mount Hood erupted and the story of how they survived it, how they had fallen in love in the midst of the eruption, had known then that they never wanted to be apart.

She smiled at her daydream. "I'll stay."

"Why are you smiling like that?"

"Oh, just naming the grandkids."

"Good," he said, smiling back. "Good."

Jim lay in the hospital bed, obsessed with worry about his family. His mother was still in respiratory therapy, but that's all he knew. Jim had a tube taped to his nose that fed him oxygen. The tape holding it in place itched. The burned patches on his arms and face were covered in gauze, and he was spacey from a pain pill they had given him.

The emergency doctor said she believed his mother had asthma, which is why she'd reacted so strongly to the ash, but that she'd be okay with treatment. Jim was confused: wouldn't she have had asthma before yesterday, too? He didn't wholly trust the doctors, but he was happy his family was all here in this hospital rather than in that trailer on the mountain. He had to stay in the hospital too, they said, for observation because he had inhaled a dangerous amount of ash. They wanted to test the ash on his clothes before they let him go, but he didn't understand why that mattered.

Lying down, his chest felt a little heavy, but he could breathe without the oxygen. He wasn't dizzy, and he wasn't coughing. "You probably will be," promised a doctor an hour ago, and Jim was still wondering what that meant. It hadn't sounded like a diagnosis as much as a threat, and he imagined there was some uncomfortable treatment coming up for him. But he wasn't worried for himself. He was worried for Mother and Lida.

Lida had gone off with his father to talk to a psychologist. Maybe that person could get her to talk normally. Or maybe time would accomplish that, time and distance from the volcano. He and his father were fine, would continue to be fine, as long as the women in the family got better too.

The old-fashioned phone by the hospital bed rang, startling Jim. It couldn't be for him. But he reached for the receiver anyway.

"Jim, bro," said a voice on the phone, "Is that you?"

"Tommy?" Jim said. "How'd you find me here?"

"Man, you're famous. It's so cool. You're on the television and everything."

"Ah." It made him uncomfortable to think that strangers had watched any part of his experience, but it could only be video taken from the helicopter finding the car, or maybe landing on the hospital roof. He'd rather nobody had nosed in on those moments, but it had to be only brief snatches, and since he didn't remember seeing anyone shooting video of them, it must have been from a distance.

Tommy was bubbling over with excitement. "Too bad it isn't still May. You'd get mucho female attention over this."

What an odd thing to think about.

"Tell me about it, man. What was the helicopter like? Were you close to the volcano? It's been plastered on the TV every second."

Jim felt a million miles distant from the voice on the phone. All that excitement Tommy felt, like it was fun, when the real experience had been one of dread and trying to figure stuff out with too little information, like a math problem plus terror, not like some stupid game. In less than twenty-four hours, Jim had experienced the most fear, the most relief, the most guilt he had ever felt in his life. He had had to dig into himself and find strengths he hadn't known he had. There was no way to communicate all that, and as he listened to Tommy babble more questions without pausing for answers, he knew he didn't even want to try.

The volcano had changed Jim. He wasn't entirely sure how, but he could see that what he had gone through had erected a new wall between him and Tommy, between him and maybe all the kids he hung out with. How could he ever talk about the blinding ash and the moments on the roof in the dark to anyone who hadn't lived it? How could he ever dismiss his parents' concerns again when he had come so close to losing them?

Trying to explain would be like trying to describe the color red to a blind man.

On the phone, Tommy had run out of questions, and Jim only said, "Thanks for calling, but they're bringing my Mom out of treatment soon and I gotta go." He hung up the phone. Where was his mother, anyway? He pulled the oxygen tube out of his nose and marched out into the hallway.

A female nurse intercepted him. "What are you doing, young man?" Her expression was stern.

"I want to find out about my mother."

Her face softened. "Sure, I understand. You're worried. And she's as worried about you, I don't doubt. Soon your family will be together again. And I'll call down to respiratory for you to see how she's doing. Right now, if you get back in bed."

"You promise? You'll tell me right away?"

"I will. Now let's get you back into your room."

She herded him back into his room and set up the oxygen tube in his nose again. When she left, he feared she'd forget about her promise, but ten minutes later, she came in and told him, "Your mother is fine. They said she's not coughing any more, but they're keeping her there for a bit longer to run another test."

"Can't I go and be with her?"

"She'll be up soon. We'll put you both in the same room so you both aren't wandering the halls checking up on each other. And your other family will be here too. It's okay, really. The worst is over. Just rest."

Jim wouldn't really rest until the four of them were in the same

place again and he could see with his own eyes that they were all fine, that his sister was talking again, his mother breathing again, and that his father didn't look so haunted.

In a flash of inspiration, he knew what he could do to help. He could phone the shaman in Sacramento and get him up here to his mother's hospital room. It's not that he suddenly believed it would do anything real--nothing scientific to bring about a cure. But it might help in other ways. His father would need that reassurance, and Jim could do this one thing for him today.

He got busy dialing.

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Chad sat at the side of Francie's bed at Pacific. A second bed in the room was empty. Something dripped into her right arm from an IV bottle on a stand. He pointed at it and raised his brows.

"Antibiotics," she explained. "I'm so sorry about your foot. It'll probably be six more months before you can take the physical part of the firefighters' test again."

He shrugged. "Or a year. But that's okay. I'm not even sure that's what I'll do. I may not want this career."

"But you'd be so good at it."

"Thank you." It was nice to hear, but-- "I don't know that I'm cut out for it. This last twenty-four hours, it's been nothing like I imagined. The tedium, the crazy guy, the two of us walking the streets, being able to do so little." He made a helpless gesture. "I mean, you were with me, and that's great, but I had always thought of a big team of us fighting a fire together. A limited, spectacular problem, solved in a few hours. Heck, I don't know what I mean. But I'm glad I have some time off with an injury to think it through."

"You aren't upset about anything else? I heard Kane giving you grief."

"Naw. I mean, yeah, he did, but it's nothing." He was surprised to realize it really didn't mean a thing to him. Two days ago, it kept him up at night. Funny. "Though I'm not sure I like people in general as much as I did before yesterday."

She adjusted herself in the bed, yanking at her flowered gown and wincing in pain as she shifted herself to get more comfortable. "Look, Chad, some people are troubled, and they'll hurt you accidentally, flailing about. Some people are nice. And some people are asshats. You must know that from working at the store or the theater. Or you know it now because of Kane. Now there's a king asshat."

"Yeah?" said Chad.

"Yeah. He wasn't always, they say. But he has been since I came

on. He's not much liked in the department. He said something to a heart attack victim so offensive last year that he's been taken off the streets. He's on mandatory counseling, too. We need fewer like him and more like you."

"That's nice of you to say."

"It's the truth. And you'll get the big fires one day. I know that's what really interests you."

"It was," Chad said. He'd been thinking about it the long drive here, about the dead bodies, about the worried people and about having no good answers for their legitimate worries, about those he couldn't even convince to leave for their own good. He could still see cars and houses sitting in ruinous mud. "Maybe I don't want to witness people lose all their things and be hurt. Or die of heart attacks in the ambulance."

Francie studied him for a long moment. "Maybe you don't." She adjusted herself in the bed again. "Close your eyes for a sec while I get this fixed. Damned hospital gowns." A few seconds later, she said, "okay" and Chad opened his eyes to see her looking at him with concern. "You do whatever you want. I know you'd be good for the department, but if it's not what you want to do any more, I know you'll be good at whatever else you decide to do instead."

"Anyways, I have time to think."

"Whatever way you go, you'll be fine. And I hope you won't lose touch with me."

"I won't. You're like--I don't know, like the older sister I never had."

"Thanks for not saying 'aunt.'"

"You're younger than that."

"You'll call me any time if you want to talk about it, right? About what you saw, or what we did, or whether you want to be a firefighter or not."

"I will." But he thought he'd be able to work this out on his own. It was a little frightening, not having the dream of being a firefighter in his head any more, not like it was, at least, all shiny and exciting like a just-polished engine ready to tear out of the firehouse bay.

But he had something else instead: an accurate vision of the work. And he had the sense of himself as a person who could function in an emergency, who could keep moving forward despite pain. He was a different man than he had been 24 hours ago. Or maybe, he was a man now, but 24 hours ago he'd still been a kid.

It was scary, yes, not seeing the future as simply as he once did. But it was good, too. He felt free.

A girl stepped through the door, an amazing-looking young woman with lots of curves and a head of wavy red hair that cascaded to mid-back. "Hey sis," this vision said, swinging a laptop case up and onto

the empty bed.

Chad turned to look at Francie, who grinned at him. "Shut your mouth, kid."

He realized he was gaping a little.

The redhead came in and kissed Francie on the cheek. "I know, we look nothing alike. I took after Mom, Francine took after Dad. I'm Beryl, by the way." Turning, she stuck her hand out and Chad shook it.

Francie said, "This is Chad."

Beryl's eyebrows shot up. She dove over, threw her arms around him and kissed his cheek, too. "You saved my sister." She backed off and smiled dazzlingly at him.

He could feel he was blushing. "Well no. I didn't. She would have been fine, at worst lonely for a little while on that porch until someone else got to her. It was nothing."

"I could've died in the lahar or gone into shock, Chad. Like I told you on the phone, Beryl, he got hurt doing it," Francie said.

Beryl's face, very expressive, turned to concern. "What's the doc say?"

Francie said, "I doubt he's seen one."

Beryl said, "What? He hasn't?"

Chad hesitated, mostly because he didn't think he could slide a word in edgewise. When they both waited longer than two seconds for him to speak, he admitted, "Two part-time jobs. No insurance."

"That's easy to take care of."

"It is?" It sure hadn't been up to now.

"Sure," said Beryl, pointing at her laptop case. "I'll simply get a website up. Five dollar donations, help out the hero."

"I'm not a hero."

"Bullshit," said Beryl cheerfully.

"But--" Chad began.

Francie waved him silent and laughed. "One does not stop the engine named Beryl when it comes tearing down a mountainside with a head full of steam."

"One doesn't," agreed Beryl.

"I can't take charity."

"Whyever not?" said Beryl. "It will only cost people a few dollars each. It adds up. It's like a tax, but only taxing the people who are willing to pay it. Best system ever."

"I," said Chad, and stopped, confused. She wasn't a steam engine, she was a force of nature, a beautiful and benevolent one. I'm smitten, he thought, and smiled that he had come up with that word.

Francie laughed as if she knew how he felt, and he narrowed his eyes and gave her a look of warning. She held up her hands, grinning: I won't say a word.

"Maybe," he said, "after visiting hours, we can talk about it over coffee." It may have been the smoothest line he had ever delivered to a girl.

"Sure," she said. "Now let me have some time alone with my sister."

He got up in a daze and left. His Achilles still hurt like a son of a gun, but in a strange way, he wanted to kiss the thing for giving him an excuse to talk more with Francie's sister.

He passed a nurse arguing with a Chinese kid in the hall and found a chair by the nurses' station. Easing down in it to wait, he felt more cheerful than he had any right to. A sour-faced old man in a wheelchair looked at him, and Chad grinned back. Eventually, the sour face softened, and the man nodded back at him. Life, thought Chad, was going to be all right.

Under the mud.

The body of the waitress from the café, Sylvie, is buried under a ton of mud, mud that will never be moved by bulldozers. In an environment without oxygen, something amazing has begun to happen to her. The mud that fills her mouth, that touches her teeth, is made of minerals. Molecule by molecule, minerals in the mud begins to replace the minerals of her teeth, preserving every detail of their shape, turning them to stone. Over a few thousands of years, the process will continue through her bones, and finally, Sylvie will achieve a state only one in a million of us can hope for: she will become a fossil. The lahar's mud will be compressed into rock. Geology is patient, tenacious if slow. Rain and snow will weather that rock away, and seventeen million years in the future, Sylvie's fossil will be revealed. Perhaps intelligent creatures will be there to see, to carefully chip her fossil out of the rock and name it. They'll be able to tell that she was female, a young adult who had never had babies, and something of her diet. Sylvie the young diner waitress will achieve the closest thing to immortality we can imagine. Fossil Sylvie will represent us all.

Downwind.

Tens of thousands of beef cattle have been suffocated by ashfall, as have thousands of sheep and hundreds of wild horses. Antelopes and bears have died, choking on ash, and many more will starve in a ruined landscape. Eagle nests and henhouses are gone. Hundreds of farmhouse roofs have collapsed. Had the wind been from the east these first two days, the devastation of Portland would have produced tens of billions of dollars in damage and hundreds more people would have died. As it happened, six downwind farm children with asthma died, in addition to the 389 people who died nearer the mountain on the first day of the eruption, including Jackson Bellew, the ski rescuer, who was searching for hikers on the timberline when the mountain went off, and the thirty-seven who died the following day, including two looters who were shot to death in downtown Camas by a shop owner who had refused to leave when the fire department told him to.

The 432 total people who died had family, had friends, had spouses or lovers; all had people who mourned them for years to

come. In many cases, like three of the snowboarders who had been in the Riverside Bar and Grille irritating Sylvie with their jokes, their parents did not know for sure that they had died in the eruption. They feared so, logic told them so when the fourth boy's body was finally identified with DNA, but they could never know for certain. More than one parent would secretly hope that a son had taken this chance to run away and start a new life, that maybe one day, in ten or twenty years, the telephone would ring, and it would be him. But those calls would never come. Their children were gone.

Downwind of Mt. Hood in a fan shaped shadow of ashfall, farming will be impossible for the next few years. But volcanic ash is also one of nature's best fertilizers. In a generation, the land under the inches of ash will come back better than it was. Wild mustangs and antelope will roam the eastern foothills again. The blasted trees on the mountaintop will grow back quickly, and two years from now, the spring wildflowers will put on a brilliant show against the gray ground, the red Indian paintbrush, the white and yellow avalanche lilies, purple saxifrage and magenta shooting stars springing out of the destruction, more beautiful than ever. Life renews itself, always.

The Mountain.

Mount Hood is quieting now, relieved of its burden of explosive rising magma. Ash continues to rise over the mountain, but it will begin to taper off this evening. The newly shaped mountaintop will emerge, and people will begin to become accustomed to the altered form. Everyone on the slopes--including Norio--is safe from more pyroclastic flows. In a week, only a bit of steam venting will remain, troubling no one, providing scenic backdrops for the television reporters.

Deep within the mountain, though, there are more magma chambers. The North American tectonic plate continues to drift westward, while the Juan de Fuca plate subducts under it, melting at depth, this magma feeding the Cascade mountain range's twenty-five active volcanoes.

In a month, Mount Hood will be sleeping again.

But only for now.

The End

Afterward: acknowledgements and a note on science

For those wanting more information on volcanoes, I recommend starting with Dr. Vic Camp of San Diego State University's website "How Volcanoes Work."

If you're interested in disaster preparedness and live in the U.S., consider taking a CERT (Community Emergency Response Teams) course locally, typically offered by a fire department. They're terrific and usually free.

As far as I could, I made the science and tech accurate in these pages as of summer 2012 when I first wrote the novel. A few times, I chose to alter facts in order to simplify matters.

All characters are invented, though some of the institutions in the novel use names of institutions in the real world. Camas has a fire department, though I've never visited it or the town itself, and I've fictionalized many of their published emergency procedures for dramatic reasons. There is a CVO in Vancouver, doing fine work I'm sure, but everything about this version of it, except its name, is fictional.

Mount Hood is an active volcano; it will certainly erupt again many times, perhaps once in your lifetime, and lahars will rush down the Sandy and other rivers. While lahars usually begin when ashfall melts glacier ice, they can also occur in rainy seasons, and I found one historical instance of a lahar preceding an eruption by twelve hours; as no hypothesis for that event was offered, I invented an explanation for a similar event in this novel. There is no lava tube cave off McNeil Point trail, but if it were deep enough and long enough, a lava tube might save you from a pyroclastic flow...or it might not. I hope you never have to test that idea.

Thanks to my Hmong students who shared their stories with me and to my neighbor Ralph for vetting the helicopter crash details. All errors are my fault, not theirs.

My deepest thanks go to you, Gentle Reader, for enjoying my story.

My blog and mailing list sign-up (for discounts and new releases) can be found at: <http://www.loucadle.com/>

Other novels by Lou Cadle

Quake

Gray, Part I

Gray, Part II

Gray, Part III

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